

Unmute This: Circulation, Sociality, and Sound in Viral Media

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## ABSTRACT

### Unmute This: Circulation, Sociality, and Sound in Viral Media

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Cats at keyboards. Dancing hamsters. Giggling babies and dancing flashmobs. A bi-colored dress. Psy's "Gangnam Style" music video. Over the final decade of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, these and countless other examples of digital audiovisual phenomena have been collectively adjectivally described through a biological metaphor that suggests the speed and ubiquity of their circulation—"viral." This circulation has been facilitated by the internet, and has often been understood as a product of the web's celebrated capacities for democratic amateur creation, its facilitation of unmediated connection and sharing practices. In this dissertation, I suggest that participation in such phenomena—the production, watching, listening to, circulation, or "sharing" of such objects—has constituted a significant site of twenty-first-century *musical* practice. Borrowing and adapting Christopher Small's influential 1998 coinage, I theorize these strands of practice as *viral musicking*. While scholarship on viral media has tended to center on visual parameters, rendering such phenomena silent, the term "viral musicking" seeks to draw media theory metaphors of voice and listening into dialogue with musicology, precisely at the intersection of audiovisual objects which are played, heard, listened to.

The project's methodology comprises a sonically attuned media archeology, grounded in close readings of internet artifacts and practices; this sonic attunement is afforded through musicological methods, including analyses of genre, aesthetics, and style, discourse analysis, and twenty-first-century reception (micro)histories across a dynamic media assemblage. By analyzing particular ecosystems of platforms, behavior, and devices across the first decades of

the twenty-first century, I chart a trajectory in which unpredictable virtual landscapes were tamed into entrenched channels and pathways, enabling a capacious “virality” comprising disparate phenomena from simple looping animations to the surprise release of Beyoncé’s 2013 album. Alongside this narrative, I challenge utopian claims of Web 2.0’s digital democratization by explicating the iterative processes through which material, work, and labor were co-opted from amateur content creators and leveraged for the profit of established media and corporate entities.

“Unmute This” articulates two main arguments. First, that virality reified as a concept and set of dynamic-but-predictable processes over the course of the first decades of the twenty-first century; this dissertation charts a cartography of chaos to control, a heterogeneous digital landscape funneled into predictable channels and pathways etched ever more firmly and deeply across the 2010s. Second, that analyzing the *musicality* of viral objects, attending to the musical and sonic parameters of virally-circulating phenomena, and thinking of viral participation as an extension of musical behavior provide a productive framework for understanding the affective, generic, and social aspects of twenty-first-century virality.

The five chapters of the dissertation present analyses of a series of viral objects, arranged roughly chronologically from the turn of the twenty-first century to the middle of the 2010s. The first chapter examines the loops of animated phenomena from The Dancing Baby to Hamster Dance and the Badgers animation; the second moves from loops to musicalization, considering remixing approaches to the so-called “Bus Uncle” and “Bed Intruder” videos. The third chapter also deals with viral remixing, centering around Rebecca Black’s “Friday” video, while the fourth chapter analyzes “unmute this” video posts in the context of the mid-2010s social media platform assemblage. The final chapter presents the 2013 surprise release of Beyoncé’s self-titled

visual album as an apotheosis to the viral narratives that precede it—a claim that is briefly interrogated in the dissertation’s epilogue.

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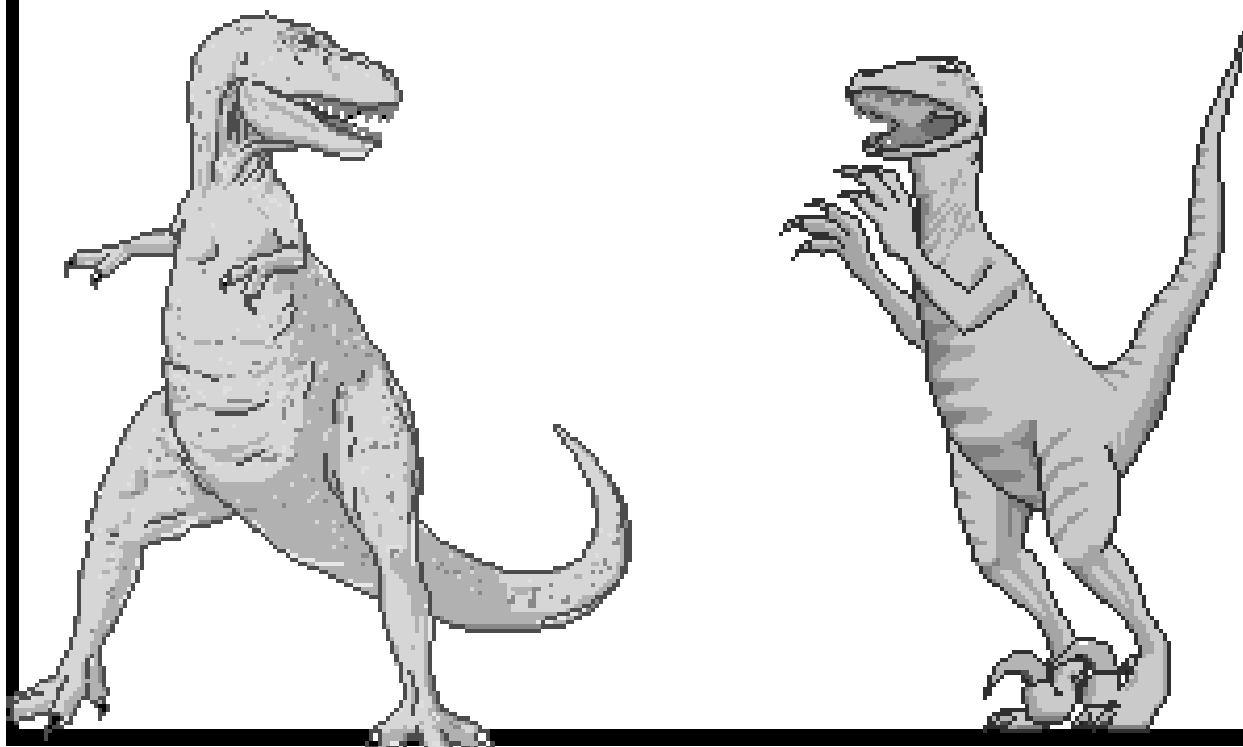
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To Dad.  
Yes, it's a meme.



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## INTRODUCTION: VIRAL MUSICKING AND UNMUTING MUSICAL VIRALITY

You get an email from a friend, containing a link. “you HAVE to watch this!!!” the email reads. You click on the link, load the file. It’s strange, but catchy, this thing your friend sent. It’s stupid, but it gets stuck in your head. You find yourself humming it later, dancing along to it, mentioning it to other friends. You see it later on a television show, then in a commercial. You go searching the internet for it, where you find other versions—still weird, but slightly different. You laugh, and watch more. You forward one to your friend, who responds that they’ve already seen it. Suddenly, it seems, *everyone* has already seen it. It’s unavoidable. It’s everywhere. It’s in your head and in front of your eyes, ringing in your ears and vibrating in your body. It’s *viral*.

Cats at keyboards. Dancing hamsters. Giggling babies and dancing flashmobs. A bi-colored dress. Psy’s “Gangnam Style” music video. Over the final decade of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, countless examples of audiovisual phenomena have been circulated in a manner resembling the tableau above. This circulation has been facilitated by the internet, and has often been understood as a product of the web’s celebrated capacities for democratic amateur creation, its facilitation of unmediated connection and sharing practices.

In this dissertation, I suggest that participation in such phenomena—the production, watching, listening to, circulation, or “sharing” of such objects—has constituted a significant site of twenty-first-century *musical* practice. Borrowing and adapting Christopher Small’s influential 1998 coinage, I theorize these strands of practice as *viral musicking*.<sup>1</sup> While scholarship on viral

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

media has tended to center on visual parameters, rendering such phenomena silent, the term “viral musicking” seeks to draw media theory metaphors of voice and listening into dialogue with musicology, precisely at the intersection of audiovisual objects which are played, heard, listened to. Additionally, my coinage of “viral musicking” foregrounds precisely the tensions between compulsion and agency that have underpinned a variety of theorizing on twenty-first-century circulation and participatory online culture; furthermore, this concept advances music and musicking as particularly fruitful vectors for cultural “virality” long preceding the advent of the Internet.

The project’s methodology comprises a sonically attuned media archeology, grounded in close readings of internet artifacts and practices; this sonic attunement is afforded through musicological methods, including analyses of genre, aesthetics, and style, discourse analysis, and twenty-first-century reception (micro)histories across a dynamic media assemblage. By analyzing particular ecosystems of platforms, behavior, and devices across the first decades of the twenty-first century, I chart a trajectory in which unpredictable virtual landscapes were tamed into entrenched channels and pathways, enabling a capacious “virality” comprising disparate phenomena from simple looping animations to the surprise release of Beyoncé’s 2013 album. Alongside this narrative, I challenge utopian claims of Web 2.0’s digital democratization by explicating the iterative processes through which material, work, and labor were co-opted from amateur content creators and leveraged for the profit of established media and corporate entities. Essentially, “Unmute This” articulates two main arguments. First, that virality reified as a concept and set of dynamic-but-predictable processes over the course of the first decades of the twenty-first century; this dissertation charts a cartography of chaos to control, a heterogeneous digital landscape funneled into predictable channels and pathways etched ever more firmly and

deeply across the 2010s. Secondly, that analyzing the *musicality* of viral objects, attending to the musical and sonic parameters of virally-circulating phenomena, and thinking of viral participation as an extension of musical behavior provides a productive framework for understanding the affective, generic, and social aspects of twenty-first-century virality.

### **Unmute This: Turning on the Sound in Internet Scholarship**

This dissertation's pre-colonic title has a double meaning. On the one hand, "Unmute This" is drawn from vernacular internet practices that I describe in this dissertation's penultimate chapter, calls for scrolling platform users to quite literally turn on a piece of media's sound. In the other meaning, I forward this vernacular caption as an invocation and intervention to an ocularcentric scholarly landscape: turn the sound on in studies of internet participatory practice.

In part, the intervention that this dissertation proposes has originated as part of a broader disciplinary divide. Following from broader diagnoses of the present and ongoing media moments as fundamentally visual—produced and consumed under a regime of dizzyingly proliferating sight and image—scholarship on internet aesthetics and participatory practices has tended to focus largely (or exclusively) on visual parameters.<sup>2</sup> This can be evidenced in the foundational work of Henry Jenkins, which attends primarily to visual aspects of digital participatory culture; to a representative special issue on Internet memes in the *Journal of Visual Culture*; to the influential collected volume *The YouTube Reader* that almost entirely fails to address music at all, despite the platform's status as one of the dominant music streaming

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, William Merrin's effective summation of McLuhan's tripartite model for media history, which, McLuhan suggests, has shifted from the oral/acoustic, to the phonetic/literate, to the contemporary electronic. William Merrin, *Baudrillard and the Media: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 48.

platforms at the time of the book's initial publication.<sup>3</sup> Recent dissertations on viral media have largely accepted and augmented this sensorial perspective as well. Ryan Artrip's recent dissertation dedicates an entire chapter to ocularcentrism and the "visuality of virality," while Jonathan Carter's "Enchanting Memes; Memetic Politics in the Face of Technocratic Control" reads memes as an extension of "visual participatory politics" and theorizes their circulation within a frame of "visual technics."<sup>4</sup>

Of course, it would be inaccurate to suggest that no scholars have addressed music, sound, and circulation in digital contexts. Indeed, a great deal of productive work on music and the internet exists, tending to cohere around a delimited set of topics and issues. Scholars have investigated the digital circulation of music, often in terms of platform usage, from peer-to-peer services like Napster to streaming services like Pandora and Spotify.<sup>5</sup> Another major focus of scholarly inquiry surrounded issues of piracy, intellectual property, and copyright—this often addressed topics of remixing or creative borrowing, but usually from a legal, rather than aesthetic or cultural, perspective.<sup>6</sup> Some popular music scholarship, in dialogue with (and often using

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<sup>3</sup> See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2008); Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).; Laine Nooney and Laura Portwood-Stacer, eds., *Journal of Visual Culture - Themed Issue: Internet Memes*, 13/3 (2014): 248–394; Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds. *The YouTube Reader* (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Ryan Artrip, "Virulence and Digital Culture" PhD diss., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2016; Jonathan Carter, "Enchanting Memes; Memetic Politics in the Face of Technocratic Control," PhD diss., University of Nebraska, 2016; 58, 203.

<sup>5</sup> See Raymond Shih Ray Ku, "The Creative Destruction of Copyright: Napster and the New Economics of Digital Technology," in *Copyright Law: Volume III: Copyright in the 21st Century*, 207-268, Benedict Atkinson, ed. (London: Routledge, 2017); Maria Eriksson, Rasmus Fleischer, Anna Johansson, Pelle Snickars, and Patrick Vonderau, *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> See Simon Frith and Lee Marshall, eds. *Music and Copyright* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Lisa Macklem, "This Note's For You—Or Is It? Copyright, Music, and the Internet," *Journal of International Media and Entertainment Law* 4/2 (2012): 249-276.

methods from) social science and digital sociology, addressed fandom practices in online spaces.<sup>7</sup> Emerging from music studies, a number of scholars studied Internet Music as a strand of avant-garde compositional practice, adjacent to longer (and continuing) narratives of computer music.<sup>8</sup>

Among this literature, however, I found significant veins of musical production and practice going entirely unremarked upon, lost in what felt like a disciplinary chasm between a visually-oriented media studies and a musicology inattentive to vernacular, ephemeral, sometimes silly Internet phenomena circulating outside of platforms and formats housing traditionally-comprehensible “musical” objects. A significant scholarly counterexample amidst this lacuna is Carol Vernallis’s 2013 *Unruly Media*, which colorfully approaches digital media aesthetics, largely from a disciplinary perspective grounded in film studies; that work prompts a greater dialogue between the disciplinary spaces of media theory and music studies.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, despite a relative dearth of scholarly attention towards music and sound in Internet circulation, early Web creativity, and across social media participatory practices, the use of musical and sonic *metaphors* have proliferated across recent media theoretical scholarship.

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Beth Ray’s *Digital Connectivity and Music Culture: Artists and Accomplices*, deals with a spectrum of these issues: analyses of music fans in online spaces, platforms like Myspace, and issues of file sharing and piracy. See Ray, *Digital Connectivity and Music Culture: Artists and Accomplices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). See also Lucy Bennett, “Music Fandom Online: REM Fans in Pursuit of the Ultimate First Listen,” *New Media & Society* 14/5 (2012): 748-763; Nancy Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Hugill characterizes “Internet music” as “a new kind of music making that sets out to explore and exploit the characteristics of the network for musical and artistic ends,” and, in Hugill’s characterization, it is largely focused on novel capacities of “the network,” from real-time performance between geographically distant actors, to affordances of listener interactivity, and algorithmic generation of musical material. See Andrew Hugill, “Internet Music: An Introduction,” *Contemporary Music Review* 24/6 (2005): 429-437. (431) See also Golo Föllmer, “Electronic, Aesthetic and social factors in Net Music,” *Organised Sound* 10/3 (2005): 185-192.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).



Kate Crawford has forwarded the notion of “listening” as a crucial orientation towards both social media and the study of it, while Yves Citton has argued that contemporary media ecologies might concord with a “polyphonic” mode of engagement.<sup>10</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, in his recent book on moderation and digital platforms, suggests that platforms employ “levers” of curation, recommendation, and moderation to “tune” their users’ experiences.<sup>11</sup> Metaphors of “voice” abound, functioning metonymically for expressions of subjectivity and ideals of democratic participation; Brandon LaBelle suggests the sonic as a political intervention in a world assumed to be visual, and Mike Annany theorizes how twenty-first-century journalism might be restructured around an understanding of the “right to hear.”<sup>12</sup>

This dissertation thus interfaces with the “sonic turn” across recent philosophy, critical theory, art, and media theory, and in particular with the emergence and broad expansion of the discipline of sound studies. Metaphors of listening, hearing, sound, and other musically adjacent terms, thread through a variety of cutting- and bleeding-edge media theory scholarship. I seek to explore connections and resonances between these metaphorical deployments of sonic metaphors and actual sonic practice online. To what extent are these proliferating sonic metaphors not *just* metaphors? And what might I demonstrate that musicologists could have to say about that?

The above complex of frustrations, particularly what I observed as the ocularcentrism of the vast majority of vernacular-Internet-oriented media theoretical scholarship, led to this

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<sup>10</sup> Kate Crawford, “Following You: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media,” *Continuum* 23/4 (2009): 525-535; Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and The Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 207.

<sup>12</sup> Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018); Mike Annany, *Networked Press Freedom: Creating Infrastructures for a Public Right to Hear* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).

dissertation's "Unmute This" title. I suggest that what is needed is an unmuting of media scholarship analyzing the Internet, and of the audiovisual artifacts circulated across the web and digital media platforms over the span of the first decades of the twenty first century. In some ways, my call to "unmute" plays into a scholarly trope of music studies, analogous to various noisy disciplinary interventions undertaken over the past several decades, in which music scholars have drawn attention to conspicuous silences in audiovisual media scholarship. These extend from the work of Chion and Gorbman in the championing the development of film music studies in the 1980s and 1990s, to Andrew Goodwin's claim at the outset of *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*—in an introduction titled "Silence! Academics at Work!"—that "very few analysts [of music video] have thought to consider that music television might resemble music...music has barely been discussed."<sup>13</sup> In calling for a musical and sonic attention to internet phenomena, I participate in a longstanding disciplinary tradition of audiovisual media; my dissertation builds on this extant model, while stretching music studies and sonic attunement to new objects and domains of inquiry.

### **Viral Musicking**

In the interest of "unmuting" internet scholarship, I propose this dissertation's central concept of "viral musicking." This term invokes Christopher Small's formative 1998 theorization

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<sup>13</sup> See Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound On Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 3.

Chion's use of "audio-viewer" in part informs the usage of "viewer/listener" that I employ throughout this dissertation, signifying a relationship between human agent and audiovisual object that is not simply "viewing," but that also is not simply reducible to the capitalist-connoting "consumer."

of “musicking,” verb-ing the noun “music” to expand its purview beyond an ontology fixed in works and their composers and performers. In Small’s original formation, he suggests that:

*To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing.*<sup>14</sup>

To *viral-music*, then, is:

*to take part in a performance of viral music in any capacity, whether by performing and/or providing material, by viewing/listening, by remixing or remediating, or by sharing that material—giving it the potential to pass on and “infect” new “hosts.”*

Small’s elaboration of his pivotal term provides a number of facets that similarly underpin my choice to adapt his term. Musicking, for Small, enacts relationships that produce meaning, and musicking is a process of affectively charged encounter between a group of strangers. As he suggests, audience members at a concert of Western art music:

are prepared to laugh, to weep, to shudder, to be excited, or to be moved to the depth of our being, all in the company of people the majority of whom we have never seen before, to whom we shall probably address not a word or a gesture, and whom we shall in all probability never see again.”<sup>15</sup>

Small suggests strong affective resonances between musickers, united around shared events or moments of musicking. While Small’s site for this is a concert hall or other standard venue for musical performance, I can easily hear this affective confluence as a significant part of what I observe in this dissertation, occurring in mediated flows across digital platforms and networks. While viral musickers may not inhabit the same physical space (as in Small’s example), shared responses comprise a huge facet of viral musicking’s power and efficacy. Indeed, as I will suggest across this dissertation, the act of *sharing* a piece of viral content, whether through direct

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<sup>14</sup> Small, *Musicking*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Small, *Musicking*, 39.

or (eventually, quite reified) digital means, is *primarily* about the transmission of common affective, emotional, and sensory experience—rather than simply the audiovisual content or information. Viral musickers laugh together, they cringe together, they quirk their brows together, they sing together—even though they might do so from opposite parts of the globe.

In theorizing musicking, Small also suggests that the relationships established by the musicking act “model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world.”<sup>16</sup> As a concept, “viral musicking” draws on this notion of musicking, foregrounding a tension that I find productive, between the kind of deeply-human, relationship-driven sociality suggested by Small’s “musicking,” and the threat of compulsory, automatic conscription connoted via the term “viral.”

Suturing the two together—“viral” and “musicking”—comprises a deliberate response to what Limor Shifman has dubbed the “who’s the boss” controversy surrounding questions of agency and free will in conceiving of virality as a cultural modality.<sup>17</sup> While Susan Blackmore suggests, in her widely read memetics treatise *The Meme Machine*, that humans are simply hosts for the collection of memes that populate and circulate through them, Henry Jenkins has devoted a number of foundational works to troubling such a notion of “virality” as a ubiquitous metaphor and totalizing explanation for online participatory behavior.<sup>18</sup> In a 2009 series of blog posts, Jenkins (along with co-authors Xiaochang Li, Ana Domb Krauskopf, and Joshua Green) argued

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<sup>16</sup> Small, *Musicking*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> See Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014); 12.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

for the elimination of this biological metaphor complex, charging that the metaphors, as they were then being commonly used, erased human agency in favor of theorizing passive consumer zombies.<sup>19</sup> “Talking about memes and viral media,” Jenkins et al. argued, “places an emphasis on the replication of the original idea, which fails to consider the everyday reality of communication”—i.e., the intervention of people as active agents in repurposing or reconstructing meaning and ideas in the process of their circulation. In this schema, media moguls and marketers are in charge, launching plagues and infections to further their own causes and brands:

[t]he metaphor of “infection” reduces consumers to involuntary “hosts” of media viruses, while holding onto the idea that media producers can design “killer” texts which can ensure circulation by being injected directly into the cultural “bloodstream.”<sup>20</sup>

It is likely that this response of Jenkins et al. to notions of perniciously overcoding cultural “viruses” in part arises against popular (mis)understandings of Richard Dawkins’s theories of memetics, which will be discussed below. However, I find an overt dismissal of the virus metaphor complex to be unproductive for two reasons. First, it is the set of terms used by the historical subjects of this dissertation, in both colloquial and corporate contexts. Secondly, to remove or replace the term “virus” in favor of foregrounding vernacular user agency is a move that too easily collapses into narratives of digital utopia, in which the World Wide Web and other digital platforms are framed as liberatory sites of democratic, creative production and exchange. An erasure of “viral” language can function to obscure the ways in which corporate protocols

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Jenkins, Xiaochang Li, Ana Domb Krauskopf, and Joshua Green, “If It Doesn’t Spread, It’s Dead (Part One): Media Viruses and Memes,” *henryjenkins.org*, 2 February 2009. [http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/02/if\\_it\\_doesnt\\_spread\\_its\\_dead\\_p.html](http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.html). Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Jenkins et al. suggest a replacement metaphor pair of “sticky” and “spreadable,” a set of concepts further articulated in Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 2013.

constrain, manage, and profit from such proliferating user action and content. Through the use of the framing of viral musicking, then, I seek to continually suggest an ambivalent relationship between voluntary and conscripted behaviors, predetermined digital pathways and innovative individual maneuverings, top-down corporate coercion and bottom-up collective involvement. In what follows, I deliberately trace viral musicking as a dialectic, often deeply ambivalent, negotiation between such forces.

### **Techniques and Aesthetics of Viral Musicking**

In theorizing viral musicking as a set or cycle of practices, I suggest a broad “techniques of viral participation” or “viral techniques,” a subset of an even broader category of “social media techniques.” In developing this formulation, I follow a number of media theorists and scholars who have productively complicated the divide between human and technology, articulating the relationship between them in terms of “techniques.”

The concept of “techniques” can be traced to sociologist Marcel Mauss, who theorized techniques as “traditional actions combined in order to produce a mechanical, physical, or chemical effect.”<sup>21</sup> Crucially, Mauss’s theorization established the *body* as a central site for the training, practice, and replication of technique. Bernhard Siegert’s expansion of Mauss formulates *cultural techniques* as those capacities which enable the “always already technological” status of the human; cultural techniques are the faculties and configurations of bodies and materials that allow *technologies* to concretize as such.<sup>22</sup> Viral musicking comprises a

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<sup>21</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Technology,” in *Techniques, Technology & Civilisation*, edited by Nathan Schlanger (New York: Durkheim, 2006), 98.

<sup>22</sup> Bernhard Siegert, “Cultural Techniques: Or the End of the Intellectual Post-war in German Media Theory,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30/6 (2013): 48-65; 56.

suite of repeated actions occurring between bodies, devices, and software—from practices of viewing, filtering, and apprehending, to actions of swiping, tapping, pressing, and scrolling—that are then harnessed, concretized, and redirected by an assemblage of swiftly innovating devices and incessantly updating software.

One central component of biological viruses, suggest virologists John Carter and Venetia Saunders, is that a virus “modifies the intracellular environment of its host in order to enhance the efficiency of the replication process.”<sup>23</sup> The “environment” for the spread of twenty-first century viral objects has been a variegated assemblage of media forms and formats. Across the moments and objects analyzed in this dissertation, viral musicking techniques of attending, of viewing and listening, of remixing and sharing, of reporting on internet phenomena—all of these operate in cooperation with, or as the precondition for, the concretization of new or altered media environments for the (more-efficient) circulation and spread of viral media. Viral agency—the force behind the “modifications” to “enhance the efficiency” of digital viral spread—is co-constituted by the evolving techniques of users and the shifting efforts of an array of media and corporate entities to provoke, capture, transform, or transduce the flows and products of viral circulation.

The efficiency of viral musicking is also fostered via the *affectivity* of viral objects and practices. In aesthetic terms, viral internet objects tend to braid Sianne Ngai’s categories of “the interesting” (“an aesthetic about difference in the form of information and the pathways of its movement and exchange”) with “the zany” (“an aesthetic as performing as not just artful play

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<sup>23</sup> John Carter and Venetia A. Saunders, *Virology: Principles and Applications* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 6.

but affective labor”).<sup>24</sup> While, for Ngai, “interesting” suggests cool intellectual distance, it also prompts particular behavior, a mandate for participatory sharing. However, while prodding circulation is key to virality, the objects of viral musicking chronicled in the following chapters are more often aesthetically appreciable as Ngai’s “zany”—a nonsense, nonstop “ludic yet noticeably stressful style.”<sup>25</sup> In their unending loops, confounding uncanniness, and surprising malleability, it is no coincidence that the objects under consideration here are often situated precisely at articulation points between labor and play, sites of friction at which tensions emerge between the productive and the pointless, the meaningless and the monetizable in early twentieth-century digital culture.

### **Virus: Epidemic, Computational, Cultural**

In what follows, I trace a brief genealogy of the cultural and media “virus,” looking to twentieth-century discourses from computer science and science fiction, co-opted into marketing and media studies. However, the work of scholars and thinkers such as Ishmael Reed, Barbara Browning and others offers an entwined longer history, in which fears of cultural and biological “infection” have concurred with anxieties surrounding cultural breach, especially via African diasporic circulation. Such theorizations provide a critical backdrop to the popularization of “virus” in philosophical models for globalization and pervasive capitalism across the late twentieth century, from Derrida to Baudrillard and Deleuze. Virality activates the utopian promises of digital advocates, through the cooperative social operation of “sharing,” even as it resonates through histories of racialization, miscegenation, appropriation, and the realities of

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<sup>24</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 9.



porous, breachable borders, cultures, and bodies. In the intertwined thread, the role of sound and music are especially prominent; threats of dangerously seductive rhythms, catchy melodies, and compulsions to move and dance rhetorically recur as racialized threats to constructions of normative white subjectivity that echo through discourses of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

### **Virus: A History**

A standard genealogy of the term “virus” might begin with a definition shared by nineteenth-century “fathers of virology” Martinus Beijerinck, Dimitri Ivanovsky, and Friedrich Loeffler as a “filterable agent” of biological disease and pestilence, a self-reproducing “contagious living fluid.”<sup>26</sup> A more precise contemporary biological understanding of virus construes it as a very small non-cellular parasite, which replicates its genomic material inside of host cells, using material from those host cells. The contemporary biological virus uncannily hovers between ontologies of life and non-life—as virologists John Carter and Venetia Saunders establish in the introduction to *Virology: Principles and Applications*, “[t]here is an ongoing debate as to whether viruses are living or nonliving; the view taken depends on how life is defined.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See A. van Kammen, “Beijerinck’s Contribution to the Virus Concept—an Introduction,” 1-8; H.-P. Schmiedebach, “The Prussian State and Microbiological Research—Friedrich Loeffler and his Approach to the ‘Invisible’ Virus,” 9-24, in *100 Years of Virology: The Birth and Growth of a Discipline*, edited by C.H. Calisher and M.C. Horzinek (Vienna: Springer-Verlag, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Carter and Saunders continue with the explanation: “Viruses have genes and when they infect cells these genes are replicated, so in this sense viruses are living. They are, however, very different to cellular life forms... When viruses are outside their host cells they exist as virus particles (virions), which are inert, and could be described as nonliving, but viable bacterial spores are inert and are not considered to be nonliving.” See Carter and Saunders, *Virology: Principles and Applications*, 6.

In a historical study of the concept, Ton van Helvoort shows viruses livelihood to have been parsed along disciplinary lines: “In 1947 the plant pathologist Starr Chester wrote: ‘The biologist, who regards the viruses as

In the 1980s, the term “virus” was adopted into the parlance of networked computing to describe emergent, often malevolent capacities of autonomous replication and transmission. As defined by Fred Cohen, a “virus” is a computer program or code designated by its ability to “‘infect’ other programs by modifying them to include a possibly evolved copy of itself...Every program that gets infected may also act as a virus and thus the infection grows.”<sup>28</sup> This notion of virus retained anxieties regarding nonliving agents—the unnerving vitality and unstoppable drive with which pieces of code could often undetectably manipulate and masquerade as human behavior. Indeed, a 1982 entity called Elk Cloner, acknowledged by many as the first computer virus, preceded the actual coinage of that term by Cohen. Instead, Elk Cloner’s creator Rich Skrenta referred to his innovation as a “program with a personality.”<sup>29</sup> That personality, though silent, was still somewhat musical—every 50th reboot of an infected computer (initially, the Apple IIs of Skrenta’s high school computer lab, infected via floppy disk) would trigger the printout of a poem:

It will get on all your disks  
It will infiltrate your chips  
Yes, it’s Cloner!  
It will stick to you like glue  
It will modify RAM too  
Send in the Cloner!

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living, studies them in living hosts where they behave as organisms; the chemist, who considers them chemicals, studies them in the test tube where he sees only their chemical and physical properties.’ Expressing the same, the plant virologist Heinz Fraenkel-Conrat wrote, in 1981: ‘Just as the five blind men may describe an elephant differently, so plant pathologists, virologists, tobacco- growers, and biochemists surely see TMV differently.’” See van Helvoort, “What is a Virus? The Case of Tobacco Mosaic Disease,” *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 22/4 (1991): 557-588; 557.

<sup>28</sup> Fred Cohen, “Computer Viruses: Theory and Experiments,” *Computer Security* 6/1 (1987): 23.  
<http://web.eecs.umich.edu/~aprakash/eecs588/handouts/cohen-viruses.html>.

<sup>29</sup> See Rich Skrenta, “The Joy of the Hack,” *Skrentablog*, 26 January 2007,  
[http://www.skrenta.com/2007/01/the\\_joy\\_of\\_the\\_hack.html](http://www.skrenta.com/2007/01/the_joy_of_the_hack.html). Accessed 2 February 2019.

Later viruses, like “I LOVE YOU” and the “Melissa” virus would thrive as non-human agents emulating (digitally-mediated) humans, circulating as e-mail messages offering tantalizing messages of (human) emotional and digital connection. Similar in both functionality and poetics to the computer virus were terms like “bug” and “worm”—nonhuman agents, straddling the border of life and non-life, burrowing perniciously and invasively, sometimes unstoppably.

From such biological and technological origins and adoptions, the concept of virality jumped nimbly into the world of media and marketing—in part through the spread of the field of Dawkins’s “memetics” in the popular science press.

### **Selfish Genes, Meandering Memes**

One popular strand of thinking cultural contagion draws on the work of Richard Dawkins, most foundationally his 1976 *The Selfish Gene*, to which can be traced the field of memetics. But in an article titled “The Misunderstanding of Memes: Biography of an Unscientific Object, 1976-1999,” Jeremy Trevelyan Burman notes the ways in which a variety of mediated reconceptions of Dawkins’s original work fundamentally altered its popular understanding, particularly in a United States context.<sup>30</sup> Burman first traces the circulation of the “meme” concept itself, from a “thought experiment” and “rhetorical device” in Dawkins’s 1976 work, to its wide dissemination in the popular scientific press, the launching of the field of memetics, and the term’s ultimate cooption (or, perhaps, mutation, deformation) in colloquial usage around Internet creative and participatory practices. Dawkins’s intended contribution in *The Selfish Gene*, Burman suggests, was the concept of the “replicator”—a “mould or template”

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<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Trevelyan Burman, “The Misunderstanding of Memes: Biography of an Unscientific Object, 1976-1999,” *Perspectives on Science* 20/1 (2012): 75-104.

that “is easily and automatically copied by virtue of its relationship to the medium in which it is found.”<sup>31</sup> Dawkins supplied this concept as a proposed superstructural container or replacement for the “gene” concept—positing that evolutionary change might be effected by replicators across a variety of biological and cultural media.

It was a 1981 popular press collection of short stories and essays, called *The Mind’s I*, that introduced Dawkins’s concept to a wider audience—but a remixed, mutated version of his concept. As Burman notes, *The Mind’s I* was a liberally-edited collection of “fantasies and reflections,” compiled by Douglas Hofstadter (author of the hugely popular *Gödel, Escher, Bach*) and Daniel Dennett. Hofstadter and Dennett excerpted (what they felt were) felicitous passages from *The Selfish Gene* and reknitted them as prose—without any indication that they had done so. The remixing effectively proposed a closer mapping of “meme” and “gene,” and in particular suggested a more active, agentive role for the newly-coined term, centering a passage that has now become famous:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.<sup>32</sup>

In foregrounding this description in their curatorial manipulations, Burman suggests that “the metaphorical meme has been made active in its pursuit of replication. Gone is the passive, chaperoned copying of the molecular soup. Memes, in this presentation, are selfish predators.

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 15. Quoted in Burman, 80.

<sup>32</sup> Dawkins, quoted in Douglas Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, eds. *The Mind’s I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul* (New York: Basic, 1981), 143.

And our brains are their prey.”<sup>33</sup> *The Mind’s I* was a massive popular hit in the United States, spreading Dawkins’s concept broadly across a nonspecialist audience—in Hofstadter and Dennett’s reframing.<sup>34</sup>

### **Viruses and Memes: A Distinction**

As a brief aside, I believe it’s prudent to articulate the distinction that I make between the terminology of “memes” and “viruses” or “viral” content in this dissertation. Both words have been widely used to describe formations and circulations of popular digital content. Both emerge from biological discourses, and the terms are often collapsed, confused, or used interchangeably. Over the course of this dissertation, I endeavor to take my usage from the vernacular definitions of these words as they coalesced and were discursively circulating around the middle of the 2010s. As will be clear, these definitions sometimes contradict those of Dawkinsian memetics, and stray far from clear homologies with epidemiological realities, but I prefer to use the two pieces of terminology in ways that accord as closely as possible with usage by users whose creations and responses I record and analyze.

A commonplace distinction between “meme” and “viral” in the 1990s and early 2000s was a distinction between noun and adjective, or noun and verb—memes were understood as objects, while “viral” was understood as dynamic, an action or process. I find it useful to make a slightly different distinction—drawing on a broad analysis of the usage of these two terms across

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<sup>33</sup> Burman, “The Misunderstanding of Memes,” 84.

<sup>34</sup> Additionally, another excerpt in the collected volume (Stanislaw Lem’s “The Seventh Sally”) appears to have partly inspired the creation of popular computer game *Sim City*. See Julie Lew, “Making City Planning a Game,” *The New York Times*, 15 June 1989: C11. <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/15/garden/making-city-planning-a-game.html>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

the early decades of the twenty-first century, I understand “memes” and “viral” objects to be different, though sometimes overlapping, categories.

For this dissertation, I use the term “meme” to indicate a relatively limited scope of circulating digital forms. Here, a “meme” is a constellation of material, comprised of recognizable iterations of a particular pattern or form, sometimes with no particular single referent or point of origin. They are often humorous or absurd. The image macros of the socially awkward penguin comprise a meme, with a repeated visual format of bands of text above and below the image of a penguin, usually referencing a relatable-but-awkward social scenario.<sup>35</sup>

[Figure 1] My definition here accords somewhat with Limor Shifman’s. Shifman defines Internet memes as, necessarily, a collective: “(a) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*.”<sup>36</sup>



Figure 1: Two examples of the “Socially Awkward Penguin” meme

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<sup>35</sup> See “Socially Awkward Penguin,” *Knowyourmeme.com*, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/socially-awkward-penguin>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 7. As Shifman notes, this usage “differs utterly from its use in the academic study of memetics: if the former tends to describe recent, often short-lasting fads, longevity is the key to ‘serious’ memetics, since successful memes are defined as the ones that survive in the long term.” Shifman, 13.

“Virus” or “viral” phenomena are, for the purposes of this dissertation, understood much more broadly as any object or content circulating quickly and pervasively through a digital community. Memes can be viral, and viruses can turn into memes—but the two terms signify different forms of creation, participation, authorship, and ontology. An important distinction in my use of the terms is in the question of imitation and iteration. Memes are non-singular and necessarily iterative, consisting of multiple alternative versions, whereas a virus might only consist of a single, unchanging entity. (If one wanted to continue the biological metaphor, memes necessitate mutation, whereas viruses only require replication through transmission.) A viral phenomenon that consists of the circulation of a single object is not a meme; a meme requires participation in the form of creation—of adaptations, new versions.

In this dissertation, then, Rebecca Black’s “Friday” video (discussed in Chapter 3) is a virus, in that the video itself was circulated wildly in March of 2011, to millions of viewer/listeners. The existence of the cover versions that I discuss in the chapter suggest that “Friday” also became a meme, through creative mutation by other users into new and different—though still recognizably-“Friday”—digital objects. The “Hampster Dance,” in Chapter 1, is also a meme, as the proliferating versions (and their centrality in the discourse surrounding the original site) suggest. However, I would be unlikely to characterize that chapter’s “Badgers” animation as a meme, as it primarily circulated as a singular object. I acknowledge that images from “Badgers” also circulated in other media outside of the internet, on shirts and tote bags and stickers, but I would consider this to be a stretch of my definition of “meme,” rather than a particularly paradigmatic example. Similarly, I would not characterize Beyoncé’s 2013 album as a particularly paradigmatic “meme,” though its broad and rapid circulation lead me to very comfortably categorize it as “viral.” Broadly, however, while I designate a difference between

the two terms, I stress their overlap, and the mutual reinforcing of memetic, mutating, iterative musicking participation to the success and efficacy of any viral contagion. On the one hand, the pervasiveness of a singular viral object might render that object particularly iconic, particularly memorable or “sticky” in Jenkins’s terms. But remixing or refashioning that central object along various audiovisual planes, or in new media vectors, has been a central component in effecting viral spread, energizing a viral fad, introducing new “mutations” into an otherwise exhausted populace.

### **Media Viruses (to Viral Media)**

Douglas Rushkoff’s 1994 *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* is one of the foundational examples of a linkage between the viral metaphor and media circulation. Rushkoff, theorizing the dissemination of information through his contemporary pervasive and seemingly-constant media ecosystem of television, film, and news, suggested that:

Media viruses spread through the datasphere the same way biological ones spread through the body or a community. But instead of traveling along an organic circulatory system, a media virus travels through the networks of the mediaspace. The “protein shell” of a media virus might be an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff, visual image, scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style, or even a pop hero—as long as it can catch our attention. Any one of these media virus shells will search out the receptive nooks and crannies in popular culture and stick on anywhere it is noticed. Once attached, the virus injects its more hidden agendas into the data stream in the form of *ideological code*—not genes, but a conceptual equivalent we now call “memes.” Like real genetic material, these memes infiltrate the way we do business, educate ourselves, interact with one another—even the way we perceive reality.<sup>37</sup>

Here, Rushkoff implicates media platforms and human perception as viral vectors, suggesting that infection consists of having our “attention” caught—such a suggestion posits the close connection between virality and the sociotechnical moderation of the senses constantly being

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<sup>37</sup> Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus!: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York: Ballantine, 1996).



negotiated under the attention economy (and does so far in advance of that term's popularization in the 2010s).

This sociocultural deployment of the virus metaphor is picked up and threaded through advertising discourse of the mid-to-late 90s. Jeff Rayport, in a piece entitled “The Virus of Marketing” for business tech blog *Fast Company*, offered suggestions for prospective “viral marketers” such as “look like a host, not a virus,” and “let the behaviors of the target community carry the message.”<sup>38</sup> Despite Rayport's and others' attempts to draw parallels, the homology of these configurations with any literal, biological definition of virus was loose at best, inhering mostly at larger metaphorical levels of spontaneity and spread; “Viral marketing” techniques sought to leverage alluringly chaotic mass-attention-getting capacities of emerging digital technologies, like e-mail and the internet—as well as user behavior around them.

This enthusiastic metaphorical adoption of “virus” into marketing and advertising discourse—from which it subsequently made its way into tropes of vernacular “viral videos” and mundane artifacts “going viral”—emerged concomitantly with what Priscilla Wald calls “the outbreak narrative” across scientific, journalistic, and fictional discourses: a mediatized formula for comprehending and communicating disease occurrences across time and global space as recognizable, iterating events.<sup>39</sup> As within the epidemiological narratives that Wald tracks across the twentieth century, from HIV to SARS to zombie apocalypse films, the viral outbreaks chronicled in this dissertation evince a narrative patterning, one which demonstrates “a

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<sup>38</sup> Jeff Rayport, “The Virus of Marketing,” *Fast Company*, 31 December 1996. <https://www.fastcompany.com/27701/virus-marketing>. Accessed 28 March 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

fascination not just with the novelty and danger of the microbes but also with the changing social formations of a shrinking world.”<sup>40</sup>

Following from the meme-ing of memetics itself, through “viral marketing” and amidst an outbreak of “outbreaks,” the coinage of “viral videos” and digital phenomena “going viral” emerged and began to flourish in the mid-2000s. In this shift, “viral” condensed to an adjectival descriptor of an audiovisual object, indicating its massive spread (often understood to occur via “organic” or bottom-up means). Virality spread, in this framing, from biology to computers, to media and marketing, to silly audiovisual objects. But listening across a variety of media, it becomes clear that the narrative of virality doesn’t simply end with music; music has long been understood—and feared—as a vector for contagion in its own right.

### **Virus: Music, Circulation, Difference**

In Ishmael Reed’s 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, a sweeping phenomenon is interpreted quite differently by protagonist PaPa LaBas and the networks of authority running the American government.<sup>41</sup> From the latter perspective, the pervasive entity—known as “Jes Grew”—is a threat that merits aggressive, hostile response, both conspicuous and covert:

this Talking Android will be engaged to cut-it-up, break down this Germ, keep it from behind the counter. To begin the campaign, NO DANCING posters are ordered by the 100s.

All agree something must be done.

“Jes Grew is the boll weevil eating away at the fabric of our forms our technique our aesthetic integrity,” says a Southern congressman.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Wald, *Contagious*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

<sup>42</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 17.

The perspective of LaBas (a Haitian houngan living in Harlem) differs markedly. He states:

Jes Grew which began in New Orleans has reached Chicago. They are calling it a plague when in fact it is an anti-plague. I know what it's after; it has no definite route yet but the configuration it is forming indicates it will settle in New York. It won't stop until it cohabits with what it's after. Then it will be a pandemic and you will really see something. And then *they* will be finished.<sup>43</sup>

“Jes Grew” is a virus, manifesting in outbreaks of song and dance. The white authorities of the novel deploy strategies of litigation and policing to address, manage, eradicate it. But it is celebrated by members of the Afrodiasporic population in the know. The Jes Grew virus *is* the legacy and history of Afrodiasporic circulation; Reed describes it as a circulating, questing entity in search of its text—a “lost liturgy seeking its litany.”<sup>44</sup>

Reed's poetic depiction of Jes Grew powerfully articulates fiction and history, resonating anxieties and actions around the inhabiting, invigorating capacities of music and dance. Indeed, music and dance have long histories—far preceding the invention of the internet—of being discursively construed as potentially-malicious infectious agents. In his work *Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease*, James Kennaway collects and accounts for a history of harmful, pernicious music dating from Western antiquity—Timotheus who could “drive [Alexander the Great] to distraction” with his music-making, King Erik I of Denmark who killed his servant in a rage brought on by the Phrygian mode, Quintilian's account of a musician driving a priest off a cliff by mis-playing ritual music.<sup>45</sup> Such ancient accounts are echoed in the present day by studies of “involuntary musical imagery”—or more commonly, “earworms.” A

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<sup>43</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 211.

<sup>45</sup> James Kennaway, *Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 1.

neologism derived originally from the German (“der Ohrwurm”), the term is often used to denote harmless and frivolous catchiness, but nonetheless invokes the terminology of computer viruses and worms, sharing connotations of burrowing and uncanny liveliness.<sup>46</sup>

Kennaway reads the recurring historical figuration of menacing music as threatening as a particular “threat to manhood, morality and political order...a tempting but sexually voracious feminine threat to masculine self-control, something reflected in the recurring trope of the feminine musical sirens luring men to their dooms.”<sup>47</sup> But, as Reed makes clear in *Mumbo Jumbo*, music’s affective and bodily potentials have functioned not just as a perceived *gendered* threat to a generalized manhood, but as *racialized* threat to *white* manhood and to normative Western patriarchal social order. In her 1998 work *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture*, Barbara Browning rehearses a Western discursive model that figures African diasporic products and circulation in terms of disease: “The metaphor is invoked—often in the guise of a ‘literal’ threat—at moments of anxiety over diasporic flows, whether migrational or cultural.”<sup>48</sup>

Anxieties over global and diasporic flows have made the “virus” a trope of contemporary theorizing—what Thierry Bardini calls the “hypervirus” of contemporary culture and philosophy. Themes and theories of virality and contagion flow through the work of theorists like Gilles

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<sup>46</sup> See Emma Burns, “Earworms: The Song Stuck in Your Head,” *Synapse* 27 November 2011, <http://www.bu.edu/synapse/2011/11/27/earworms/>. Accessed 22 June 2017; Andrea Halpern and James Bartlett, “The Persistence of Musical Memories: A Descriptive Study of Earworms,” *Music Perception*, 28/4 (2011): 425-431; Victoria Williamson et al., “Sticky Tunes: How Do People React to Involuntary Musical Imagery?” *PLoS ONE* 9/1 (2014): <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0086170>.

<sup>47</sup> Kennaway, *Bad Vibrations*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Barbara Browning, *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 6.

Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida.<sup>49</sup> As Bardini notes, Baudrillard reads virality in the proliferation of simulacra in the absence of the real; he and Derrida observe its spread in terrorism and destructive global violence. William Burroughs forwarded language as a virus, and then Laurie Anderson sang it.<sup>50</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's formulation of Empire draws its vitality from the capacity of the multitude, operating upon the multitude "host" as a viral parasite.<sup>51</sup> Jussi Parikka suggests some of the appeal for twentieth- and early twenty-first-century thinking: virus constitutes a "specific mode of action, as a logic of contagion and repetition that can be used for questioning issues of assemblages of the object and the complex ontology of contemporary capitalist culture."<sup>52</sup> Such a proliferation is suggestive of how virus itself has virally spread, appealing for its homologies with rapid technologized circulation and the chaotic complexities of global economic and cultural flows; its very ambivalence and mutability form the core of its contemporary appeal as a concept. Importantly, Tony Sampson argues that

*Virality* is...evident in corporate and political efforts to organize populations by way of the contagions of fear as represented through, for example, the War on Terror. However, the potential for the spreading of social power epidemics is also evident in a tendency to be automatically drawn toward and contaminated by mesmeric fascinations, passionate interest, and joyful encounters.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Thierry Bardini, "Hypervirus: A Clinical Report," *ctheory.net*, 2 February 2006. [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=504](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=504). Accessed 12 February 2019.

<sup>50</sup> See William Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1962); Anderson, "Language is a Virus (From Outer Space)," *Warner Bros. Records* (1986)

<sup>51</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 361.

<sup>52</sup> Jussi Parikka, "Contagion and Repetition: On the Viral Logic of Network Culture," *Ephemera* 7/2 (2007): 288.

<sup>53</sup> Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 14.

Sampson suggests that positive affect, resolving into love, amusement, or pleasure, might catalyze effective viral spread; it is precisely this point at which music serves as a potent vector, as a transmission mechanism generally assumed to be the carrier of beneficial (or at least benign) substance.

### **Music as Diasporic, Contagious, Technology, Technique**

In *Infectious Rhythm*, Barbara Browning traces her own series of contagion narratives, all explicitly drawing together diasporic cultural practices, white Western anxieties, and flows of bodies, fluids, and “infectious” agents—from religious practices, to musical rhythms, to biological entities. These moments are manifest in musical genres and idioms. Browning cites hip hop, reggae, mambo—“[a]ll ‘infectious’ rhythms—all spread quickly, transnationally, accompanied by equally ‘contagious’ dances, often characterized as dangerous, usually as overly sexually explicit, by white critics.”<sup>54</sup>

Afrodiasporic musical production and the viral invoke the intersection of technology as well; Browning cites the recurrence of Afrodiasporic threads across the genre of 1980s cyberpunk, where authors like William Gibson envisioned a technologized, cyborg future in which Haitian Vodou ritual functioned just as effectively as connective hardware for “jacking in” to the global digital network, where capricious loa might operate in tandem with code.<sup>55</sup> This connection between Afrodiasporic cultural circulation and technology that Gibson and other (white Western) cyberpunk authors articulated in their fiction has been realized and resonated

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<sup>54</sup> Browning, *Infectious Rhythm*, 6.

<sup>55</sup> See William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984); Gibson, *Count Zero* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1986).

across a rich body of scholarship. Alexander Weheliye, for example, has elaborated Black theoretical frameworks engaging technology *and* the body (rather than simply technology's effacement *of* the body)—far in advance of the Internet and its concomitant discursive proliferation around digital technologies.<sup>56</sup> And Louis Chude-Sokei's recent work eloquently articulates the history of race being made to function as template for new technological epistemologies, the relations of human and non-human.<sup>57</sup> Music and sound function centrally to both scholars' analyses, leveraged as both site and mechanism for study.

It would be a mistake, therefore, for a variety of reasons, to treat race and gender as neutral categories, or whiteness (and straight male-ness) as default identity categories and subject positions across the digital ecosystems charted in this dissertation. Indeed, in her landmark work *Digitizing Race*, Lisa Nakamura critiqued preceding internet discourse framed in terms of a 1990s neoliberal "color-blindness," arguing instead through the lens of visual culture studies that "users of the Internet collaboratively produce digital images of the body—very particular things for very particular uses—in the context of racial and gender identity formations."<sup>58</sup> Alondra Nelson, in the introduction to her edited issue of *Social Text*, further stressed the problematic nature of two common narratives: both technoutopian claims of the erasure of difference (and difference-based oppression) through technology, and "digital divide" narratives, which obscure

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<sup>56</sup> See Alexander Weheliye's "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* 71 20/2 (Summer 2002): 21-47.

<sup>57</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); 6.

long histories of Black contributions to technological advancement, and the imbrication of Black people and Black creative practice in the use and shaping of technologies.<sup>59</sup>

But as much as I am galvanized by the interventions of the preceding scholars, the narrative(s) of this dissertation tend to track more pessimistic and exclusionary operations of technology and race. Rayvon Fouché notes that “a major limitation of [such a] perspective is that it does not embrace the ways that African American people acquire technological agency by being resourceful, innovative, and most important, creative.”<sup>60</sup> Fouché stresses the space of the “vernacular” in creating counterformations to work that simply focuses on the use of technology as an exclusionary oppressive force against marginalized populations. In this dissertation, I do focus on practices largely considered “vernacular,” but in tracking largely “canonic” or massively-viral phenomena, especially those emerging in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I acknowledge that I am still working within a space where limitations of access to particular hardware and software—as well as to other established networks, like those in “legacy” entertainment or journalistic media—frequently conformed to lines of privilege in terms of class, race, and gender.

Of course, I am not suggesting that these voices, communities, and practices outside of this demographic didn’t exist or participate in viral musicking events. But my reading of the viral Internet archive, from Usenet groups to WebRings to forum boards, resonates with the settler-colonialist language with which it was often metaphorically characterized in the 1990s and early 2000s. This was a landscape where young-straight-white-male-ness was the assumed norm,

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<sup>59</sup> Alondra Nelson, “Introduction: Future Texts,” *Social Text* 71/20/2 (Summer 2002): 1-16.

<sup>60</sup> Rayvon Fouché, “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity,” *American Quarterly* 58/3 (2006): 641.



where the most prominent voices and most powerful and well-connected users matched that description, and where (deeply musical!) updatings of blackface minstrelsy and other racist, oppressive, and exclusionary practices fundamentally informed a variety of the creative, vernacular sharing and remixing practices so often celebrated as part of Web 2.0.

My work in this dissertation thus resonates with the theorizations and analyses of scholars whose work has demonstrated how mainstream digital platforms present a constructed “neutrality” of hostile, gatekeeping normative whiteness, and how mainstream audiovisual and other digital cultural production relies on appropriation from the derided practices and aesthetics of marginalized groups, deployed to (profitable) celebration as novel by privileged mainstream practitioners.

For example, Kyra Gaunt suggests how affordances of context collapse on social networking platforms made Black girls’ twerking performances of “body-work” available for cooption by powerful white performers like Miley Cyrus, whose high-profile performance of the dance genre worked to strategically “shed the skin of her commercial identity that enclosed her adolescence as Disney’s darling.”<sup>61</sup> The theorist and performance artist American Artist notes similar inequalities in distribution of rewards and consequences among viral video stars.<sup>62</sup> Such disparities are etched across broader, repeated narratives across the platforms and histories of the internet; Safiya Noble’s work elucidates the racial biases informing (and informed by) the results of ubiquitous processes of web search, while American Artist further situates the foundational move to the whiteness of contemporary GUI (graphical user interface) as a reflection of its

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<sup>61</sup> Kyra Gaunt, “YouTube, Twerking & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27/3 (2015): 244-273; 255.

<sup>62</sup> American Artist, “Bobby Shmurda: Viral and Invisible,” *New Criticals* 12 May 2016. <http://www.newcriticals.com/bobby-shmurda-viral-and-invisible>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

embedded histories of racialization—“an abstracted representation of a person’s relationship to a machine.”<sup>63</sup>

Many of the practices of viral musicking that I trace across this dissertation can be read, in part, as doing similar damaging work. Some functions to direct flows of attention and capital from those in marginalized positions to those already holding positions of privilege and prestige. Some of the viral musickings that follow draw their affective power and meaning-making potential from histories of oppression and racist, sexist violence. Viral musicking thus operates as a deeply ambivalent set of techniques, capable of swiftly circulating both pleasure and violence.

### **Music as Viral Vector**

As the framings of Reed, Browning, and others suggest, music’s understood capacity as a vector of viral cultural contagion far precedes the advent of the internet. Rhetorics of musical contagion across history have ambivalently situated music’s infectious capacity as both compelling but concerning, figured as a potentially-invasive other, with a capacity to infiltrate normative bodies and upset normative social order. A few anecdotal constellations from the early twentieth century suggest music’s understood affordance as a vector of virality, its propensity for certain kinds of novel, alarming transmission.

In the summer of 1923, the song “Yes! We Have No Bananas” became a smash hit in the United States. The befuddled *New York Times* understood a hyperbolic “97.3 per cent of the great American Nation” to be singing “zestfully and with unanimity.”<sup>64</sup> The novelty song,

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<sup>63</sup> Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018); American Artist, “Black Gooey Universe,” *unbag.net*, 11 January 2018; 40. <http://unbag.net/issue-2-end/black-gooey-universe/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>64</sup> “‘Yes! We Have No Bananas’—and Why,” *The New York Times*, 12 August 1923: BR8.

composed by Jewish-American composers Frank Silver and Irving Cohn, humorously musicalized the calls (and the non-standard diction) of Italian and Greek immigrant street vendors.<sup>65</sup> A July 1923 feature on the song in *Time Magazine* linked the song's popularity—and its seemingly “non-musical” or novelty origins—to even earlier examples of non-human musical agency, citing the nineteenth-century origin myth of Domenico Scarlatti's so-called *Fuga del gatto* (Cat Fugue):

The scholarly inclined may link this account of genesis with many stories of how other pieces of music were composed. There is, for instance, the *Fuga del Gatto* of Scarlatti. One day the composer heard a strange series of piano notes. His cat had scampered across the keyboard. The notes were firm in his memory, and he used them as the melody, the theme for a highly learned and intricate composition, a fugue.

This association of animal and non-white “other” sound-making, and the positing of both as sites for co-optable musical potential, are themes that will recur across the dissertation's Internet-originating examples as well.

“Yes! We Have No Bananas” spread as a song, through recordings, sheet music, and singing in the street.<sup>66</sup> It mutated across musical and non-musical formats. Shortly after the initial song's release, composers James Hanley and Robert King took advantage of its popularity and iconic titular line, revamping its genre in the aptly named “I've Got the Yes! We Have No Banana Blues.”<sup>67</sup> The iconic title made frequent discursive reappearances that necessarily got the song back into reader's and hearer's heads: coverage on local farmer's markets in a 1924

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<sup>65</sup> See “No Bananas,” *Time Magazine*, 2 July 1923, Vol. 1, Issue 18; 15.

<sup>66</sup> Because of its ecumenical appeal, the song was even used as a communal song of protest among united Catholics and Protestants in the Belfast Outdoor Relief Strikes of 1932. See Paddy Devlin, *Yes, We Have No Bananas: Outdoor Relief in Belfast, 1920-39* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1981).

<sup>67</sup> James Hanley and Robert King, “I've Got the Yes! We Have No Banana Blues,” (New York: Shapiro, Bernstein & Co., 1923).

*Chicago Tribune* feature jokingly referenced it, and the *Hartford Daily Courant* reported on the song's use in "Senatorial slang" across discussions of tariffs in 1929.<sup>68</sup>

"Yes! We Have No Bananas" functioned as a paradigmatic musical contaminate of early twentieth-century American popular music, and subsequent "outbreaks" were framed in terms of it. A decade later, the song "Music Goes 'Round and Around" was similarly vexing journalists with its catchiness, many of whom made a direct comparison between the 1935 hit and its 1923 produce-based predecessor. A feature in *The Washington Post* reflected on the song as "a dementia, scientifically unclassifiable...it was hard to escape from the daffy phrase."<sup>69</sup> And the song had, indeed, made its way around—the world. *The China Press*, an English-language Shanghai publication, chronicled the transcontinental arrival of the tune ("Music Idiotic, Words Worse!")—complete with the addition of Chinese lyrics.<sup>70</sup> This article somewhat facetiously noted the song's polylingual reach ("the number has been translated into Yiddish, Italian, Spanish, Hungarian, German, Polish, Ukranian, Greek, Negro dialect, Irish brogue, and pig-Latin") and suggested its dissemination across a variety of media forms: sheet music, American radio broadcasts, orchestra concerts, and a promised new recording through R.C.A. Victor China.

These songs weren't just *popular*—they were *viral*. The distinction can be read in the way that these songs were characterized in terms of pathology, certainly. Prefiguring the linkage in the *Washington Post* feature between "Music Goes Round and Round" and "a dementia," a

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<sup>68</sup> Mark Sullivan, "Banana Song Now By-Word in Senate," *The Hartford Daily Courant*, 22 September 1929: 2E; "Yes, We Have No Bananas," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 31 August 1924: 4A.

<sup>69</sup> "Music Goes Round and Round' Perpetrated by 'Red' Hodgson," *Washington Post*, 7 February 1937: 5.

<sup>70</sup> "'The Music Goes 'Round and Around'—So Will Shanghai!" *The China Press*, 1 March 1936: 2.

cartoon accompanying an August, 1923 editorial on “Yes! We Have No Bananas” in *The Baltimore Sun* figured the song among a variety of other similarly “catchy” novelty tunes, with a group of cacophonous, deeply-immersed singers quarantined behind barbed wire and referred to as “inmates.” [Figure 2] Such framings of unavoidable, contaminating music resonate with longer histories of music and sound figured as forces for contagious malady, from James Kennaway’s historical linkage of pathologized musical discourse to modernity, to Samuel Llano’s analysis of music and sound as contested sites of urban “hygiene” in nineteenth-century Madrid.<sup>71</sup>



Figure 2: Cartoon “They Should be Segregated Off to Themselves and Made to Sing these Songs to Each Other,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 12 August 1923: 8.

<sup>71</sup> See Samuel Llano, *Discordant Notes: Marginality and Social Control in Madrid, 1850-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); James Kennaway, *Bad Vibration: The History of the Idea of Music as Cause of Disease* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

But the virality of “Yes! We Have No Bananas” and “Music Goes ‘Round and Around” can also be adduced in the particular befuddlement from voices of journalistic authority regarding the way that these pieces of music were understood to be *exceeding* or operating outside of standard circulating procedures for “popular” music, or receiving a surfeit of attention out of measure with the songs’ perceived “musical value.” Music, in the above instances, was heard to be replicating itself in surprising ways across variegated systems of media and circulation, regardless of perceived quality, content, industry standards or top-down attempts at management, boundary-enforcement, or control.

Of course, this newspaper coverage, though nominally functioning as exterior commentary to the songs-as-phenomena, was a fundamental component part of these songs’ circulation. Newspaper features, headlines, comics functioned alongside sheet music, records, and referential versions in spreading, circulating, and re-circulating these viral hits. As will be made repeatedly clear across this dissertation, reading the accounts of “Yes! We Have No Bananas” and “Music Goes Round and Round” is remarkably similar to reading a newspaper account of a viral video in 2005 or 2006—from the expressions of confusion regarding the song or object’s ubiquity, despite its lack of clear markers of quality; to the attempts to decode the music’s success (often with appeals to experts, like musicologists and neurologists); extending even to the broad theorizations about the song’s spread, and concerns regarding the infectious potential of any similar popular music.

### **Viral Musicking: A Twenty-First-Century Musical Practice**

Though I hear the above early twentieth-century examples as evidence of music’s capacity to be an infectious agent, I situate my coinage of “viral musicking” specifically within a

context of the twenty-first century. With an acknowledgement that music has long functioned as a “vector” for cultural “virality,” I nonetheless wish to separate out the early twenty-first-century media ecosystems analyzed in the following chapters. These, I suggest, have afforded particular modes and techniques of participatory consumption, alongside changing parameters for musicking more broadly, with the advent of online file sharing and the rise of digital and streaming music services.

This dissertation’s “outbreak narratives,” the central events in which acts of viral musicking participate, are the courses by which Internet audiovisual objects “go viral.” To “go viral”—this is a verb formulation that ascribes agency to a media object that has been widely circulated across a particular community/audience/public—generally on digital Web 2.0 platforms, especially large-usership aggregate and “social media” platforms arising in the 2010s (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, Instagram.). The “going-viral” media object in question might be or have been a number of things—a video, a picture, a piece of text. Mundane and childish or weighty and serious. Funny, heartwarming, bizarre, or brutal.

The community or public “infected” by the viral agent might also have been a variety of sizes or constitution. Some of the objects under scrutiny in this dissertation seemed to have a near-universal reach; they were viewed or engaged with by several millions of people.

“Gangnam Style”—a quintessentially viral object *not* analyzed in this dissertation—has been viewed more than a billion times as of this writing. Other virally-circulating populations were smaller, communities centered around particular interests or identity formations—though possibly widely displaced geographically, their connections afforded by technologies of the internet, computers, mobile smartphones. Early instances of virality were oddities circulated through digital space, URLs shared on messages boards and in emails. They spread by word of

mouth as well: “Have you seen--?” as precursor to a sharing. This is, perhaps, the paradigmatic viral infection: friends acting as curators and impresarios of content, compelling the audienceship of friends and colleagues to a computer screen.

But this did not comprise the *only* mode of viral musicking: remixing, reinterpreting, “mutating” the virus in question (in some methods, operating the viral content like a “meme” as described above) has constituted a prominent form of viral circulation and viral musicking across the decades tracked in this dissertation. Many of the audiovisual objects that I analyze in the following chapters might be described as “modular,” one of Lev Manovich’s principles of new media.<sup>72</sup> Viewer/listeners approaching the Hampster Dance website created versions of their own, substituting in alternative .GIF and looping sound files. Participants in viral musicking around Rebecca Black’s “Friday” video swapped out Black’s vocals for manipulated versions. And by the surprise release of Beyoncé’s visual album in 2013, modularity was built into the user interface of networked platforms; viewer/listeners in the *BEYONCÉ* musicking sphere participated in part by producing and circulating modules of content—posts on social media platforms on Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook. To suggest that such modularity might be read musically is in alignment with Manovich himself; in a 2005 essay entitled “Removability and Modularity,” Manovich cites scholarship on DJ culture as predecessor to the cultural logics he suggests, and notes that “[t]he only fields where sampling and remixing are done openly are music and computer programming.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>73</sup> Manovich, “Remixability and Modularity,” *manovich.net*, October 2005. [http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/046-remixability-and-modularity/43\\_article\\_2005.pdf](http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/046-remixability-and-modularity/43_article_2005.pdf). Accessed 12 February 2019.



Additionally, virality has been afforded, negotiated, and nurtured through dialogic relations between emerging and existing (or “old” and “new”) media forms and formats. My analyses of the phenomenon in the chapters that follow accord with Jenkins and David Thorburn, the editors of the 2003 volume *Rethinking New Media*, who assert that in “instances of media in transition, the actual relations between emerging technologies and their ancestor systems prove to be more complex, often more congenial, and always less suddenly disruptive than was dreamt of in the apocalyptic philosophies that heralded their appearance.”<sup>74</sup> Like the authors in that volume, I seek to position this chapter (and this dissertation more broadly) on “a sensible middle ground between euphoria and panic”—at least in terms of historicizing media forms in relation to one another.<sup>75</sup>

Extant authoritative or legacy media forms like television and newspaper proved vital in the circulation of the objects throughout this dissertation, and their various musickings as well. Reportage on viral artifacts and viral musicking practices initiated in practices of reporting on the internet as an emergent medium more broadly, covering its phenomena as both news and novelty. Additionally and subsequently, such coverage would function as a strategy for such “residual” platforms to participate in the online “attention economy,” to siphon off and redirect viral attention to and through corporate and legacy flows.<sup>76</sup> These hybrid media interactions evidence what Jenkins has famously dubbed “convergence culture”: “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the

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<sup>74</sup> David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, “Introduction,” in *Rethinking Media Change*, Thorburn and Jenkins, eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Chapter 5 demonstrates a maximization of this set of techniques.

power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.”<sup>77</sup> While Jenkins’s convergence culture analysis tended to stress the role of human agents over that of media devices or technologies—crucially, Jenkins coined the term participatory culture as a theoretical wield against technologically deterministic analyses, as well as those that would figure spectators as passive—in the analyses that follow, I endeavor to center co-constitutive entwinements of human and nonhuman actors, and to track dynamic relations between the affordances of code and platforms, the performance of software, the behavior of users, the strategizing of corporate entities, the formation and deformation of narratives, patterns, and genres.

### **Unmute This: An Overview**

This dissertation does not claim to be an exhaustive catalog of every viral internet phenomenon. The five chapters that follow can be read as case studies, falling roughly chronologically from the turn of the twenty-first century to the middle of the 2010s. This relatively confined and selective chronological trajectory foregrounds the ways in which shifting digital assemblages afforded distinct modes and forms of “virality,” constraining and enabling a wide variety of aesthetic paradigms, corporate and vernacular participatory practices, and media formats and circuits. “Going viral” in 1999 meant something different than “going viral” in 2011. It involved different assemblages of media, different forms and genres of participation. It happened on different timespans, at different scales, and on different platforms.

Though the case studies are meant to highlight distinctions—and, through the revelation of these distinctions, to reinforce the necessity of careful diachronic attention to studies of “the Internet” and its contents and its denizens—they also trace recurrences, looping patterns and

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<sup>77</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 2.

shared trajectories common across the viral Internet outbreaks of the early twentieth century. These recurrences include the remediating and mutually-interactive relationships between “old” and “new” media suggested above, the continuing role of “residual” media like television and print journalism in circuits of viral musicking. Recurrences include patterns of frictions, cooptions, and appropriations occurring between corporate and vernacular musickers, the negotiations of flows and transmutations from “viral” capital to other forms of cultural and economic capital. The objects and practices in these case studies also raise themes that thread from chapter to chapter: social, political, technological issues like surveillance, harassment, and the renegotiation of public and private space; cultural and identity issues like gender, sexuality, race, class, and difference, and the performance or exploitation of those identities; musical and aesthetic issues like voice and vocality, genre formation, audiovisuality, taste, and affect.

In the dissertation’s first chapter, I theorize an early viral landscape of disparate sites and objects, characterized by absurdity and low production values. Across this chaotic networked terrain—often rhetorically framed as a new “wild west”—I forward the loop as a central formal and format parameter of amateur Internet circulation and aesthetics. I leverage musicological work on repetition, from Jacques Attali to Robert Fink and Elizabeth Margulis, as a valuable intervention to theories of Internet aesthetics that have emerged largely from film and visual culture studies, and I examine the circulation and reception of objects such as Dancing Baby and The Hamster Dance as vexing, endlessly looping exemplars of virality *avant le lettre*.

The second chapter builds on the preceding analysis of loops, I move to consider the phenomenon of “musicalization” of speech in amateur video clips as an early viral convention. Using the example of the 2006 “Bus Uncle” phenomenon, which erupted from amateur video footage of a dispute on a Hong Kong public bus, this chapter analyzes an instance of global viral

musicking, emerging from one of the major urban centers for early mobile phone adoption. Drawing on later instances like 2010's "Bed Intruder" constellation, I further demonstrate how humorous aestheticizing served to render palatable a range of practices of mass surveillance and shaming, dramatizing renegotiations between public and private spheres of urban life afforded via increasingly-ubiquitous smartphone usage.

The widely-maligned video "Rebecca Black – Friday," an accidental viral sensation from early 2011, is the central object of the third chapter. Continuing on from the last chapter's media ecosystem, this chapter analyzes the affordances and participatory practices particular to the early-2010s YouTube platform, as well as to the wide variety of audiovisual remixes that were created and circulated around the negatively-received original video. The processes of producing and consuming these videos, I argue, participated in a variety of affective recuperations of the song and video. The analysis of this constellation draws together questions of genre, internet community formation, and asymmetries of visibility and power with interlocking issues of gender, online bullying, and internet-mediated celebrity.

The dissertation's penultimate chapter analyzes an internet video microgenre—one that I dub "unmute this" video posts—as particular intersections of behavior, devices, and content that function to prismatically reveal a number of broader issues within twenty-first-century audiovisual media and participatory behavior. I suggest how these video posts elucidate a reframing of the digital sensorium and point to a distinct mode of online socialization, a particular "sociality" of social media occurring in the mid-2010s. As a background and corollary to this explication of vernacular behavior, I sketch the rise of a platform-based digital assemblage effecting what Marc Andrejevic has called "the process of digital enclosure," and suggest how negotiations of sound and listening factored deeply into a variety of mid-2010s attempts to

harness and monetize “attention” as a commodity in a digital economy of platforms, advertisements, and data.<sup>78</sup>

In the final chapter, I untangle the assemblage of devices, software, and human action that enabled the riotous success of *BEYONCÉ*, a “visual album” released without notice in December 2013. However, despite the celebratedly novel apparatus of circulation, this chapter pushes *against* a reading of the *BEYONCÉ* release as a wholly groundbreaking rupture, demonstrating instead the deft ways in which the viral logics and pathways, established and theorized in the preceding chapters, were savvily co-opted by the pop star and her team into extant music industry frameworks.

The goal of *Unmute This* is not to distill or posit a set of features shared by objects that have or have not “gone viral.” Rather, through close readings of circulating objects, digital forms, and platform affordances, it establishes “viral” explosions as particular manifestations of specific social, media, and musical ecosystems. Though I argue for the distinctness of individual viral phenomena, however, I forward an understanding of *virality* as cyclical, iterative, and musical. Ultimately, the dissertation traces a reification of “virality,” from amusing amateur accidents to major corporate mechanisms—enabled through processes of listening, performing, remixing, sharing, *musicking*.

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<sup>78</sup> Marc Andrejevic, “The Work of Being Watched: Interactive Media and the Exploitation of Self-Disclosure,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19/2 (2002): 230-248; 238.

## CHAPTER 1: MUSICAL LOOPS AND THE EARLY INTERNET

### Prelude: Badgers

In September 2003, in a small personal post on the technology blog *Ars Technica*, blog founder Ken Fisher gave this recommendation for an internet object to his readers:

From the WITNOATIGAD-department comes this link. Warning: highly addictive, yet oddly unexplainable flash cartoon featuring techno music, badgers, and snakes. No “adult” content, but if anyone catches you watching this for, say, the 4 minutes I have been watching it straight, they might have you committed.<sup>1</sup>

The link in question directed readers to a cartoon featuring bright, simple animations of badgers, mushrooms, and a snake, with a pulsing beat and childishly simple lyrics. The cartoon in question had been posted to popular cartoon and humor site Weebls Stuff a little over a week before Fisher’s posting, and was simply titled “Badgers,” with a short disclaimer: “goes out of sync after a while sorry.”<sup>2</sup>

In Fisher’s post, the “department” facetiously referenced is given an acronym—perhaps standing for “What in the Name of All that is Good and Decent”—that suggests the influential tech blogger’s overarching reaction to what he’s sharing: bewilderment and affronted taste.<sup>3</sup> Though brief, Fisher’s report contains a number of components that open up this object—and, I will argue, an array of related internet audiovisual objects of the late 1990s and early 2000s—for

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Fisher, “Mushroom, mushroom, mushroom... a snake, a snaaayyyke!” *Ars Technica*, 11 September 2003. <https://arstechnica.com/uncategorized/2003/09/2799-2/>

<sup>2</sup> Jonti Picking (Weebl), “Toons>>Badgers,” *Weebls-stuff.com*, 2 September 2003. <https://web.archive.org/web/20030927174306/http://www.weebls-stuff.com/toons/21/>. Accessed via Internet Archive 16 August 2018.

<sup>3</sup> While I admit that I have no concrete evidence for my proposed expansion of this acronym, I believe that this is a likely option, at least for all but the final letter. I briefly considered “What in the Name of All that is Good and *Digital*” as an alternative possible interpretation, which I find appealing, but seems like more of an interpretive stretch.

closer scrutiny. First, the function of this *Ars Technica* piece: Fisher, speaking from a position of authority, directs his audience of Web-engaged tech enthusiasts to an item of amateur entertainment content. In doing so, Fisher collapses the functionality of serious, professional communication and more intimate, friendly sharing in the blog format. The content that he recommends—a humorous amateur video—is certainly not professional, *per se*, but its indexing by Fisher gives it a certain newsworthy (or at least post-worthy) status. Fisher’s post provides a model of early media coverage, in which voices of newsmaking and journalistic authority find themselves tasked with curating, presenting, and explaining bizarre internet humor and content to their audience of readers.

Additionally, in his description, Fisher suggests a model of viewership for this novelty Web object: watching the cartoon for “4 minutes.” While this timespan might seem trivial, the span of “Badgers” is only thirty seconds in duration. Fisher is admitting to watching the simple, internally-repetitive, half-minute “Badgers” eight times. Even if Fisher’s statement is hyperbolic, his hyperbole itself is telling, suggesting an unusual, involuntary temporal and relational orientation towards this Internet object. I center this chapter around repetition as a function and phenomenon, and Fisher’s description of his own consumption practice (along with his implicit suggestion that his readers might copy or share this behavior) follows what I understand to be a central sensory component to the experience of “Badgers” and objects like it: the incomprehensible, addictive pleasure of the loop. In his description, Fisher suggests the kind of pathology so often associated with loops and repetition, and of those who create, enjoy, or participate in them. Pleasure in the repeated strange-but-unchanging object is shameful, taboo: “they might have you committed.”

## Introduction: Listening to Loops

In this chapter, I argue that loops constitute a primary aesthetic functionality of early Internet circulation and virality. The chapter examines some aesthetic features of a particular set of early internet audiovisual objects: those characterized by looping images, sounds, or images and sounds. Many of these features exemplify what Nick Douglas dubs the “Internet Ugly” aesthetic: a “celebration of the sloppy and the amateurish.”<sup>4</sup> These features include absurd or avant-garde images or image-music relations, low-quality formats and content, errors or glitches (intentional or unintentional), and, of course, the feature of the loop. I posit the loop as central to this twenty-first-century digital aesthetic, analyzing its emergence in contingency and constraint, its effects and its cultural meanings, and the implications for understanding other internet and cultural production—and its circulation—as music.

Across the course of this chapter, I analyze constellations of circulation around four looping audiovisual objects of the millennial era—that is, spanning the turn of the millennium, from about 1995-2003. The objects in this chapter were viral *avant le lettre*; their circulation preceded the coinage of the term “viral video” or the vernacular usage “to go viral” that would develop and proliferate from the mid-to-late 2000s, but they nonetheless share many of the trajectories and discursive tropes that would solidify around “virality” a few years later.<sup>5</sup> These four artifacts—the Dancing Baby (1996), the Hampster Dance (1999), the Badgers video (2003),

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<sup>4</sup> Nick Douglas, “It’s Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Ugly Internet Aesthetic,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 13/3 (2014): 315.

<sup>5</sup> Though, in an early article for *Network World* covering the Dancing Baby phenomenon, reporter Paul McNamara does suggest an understood linkage between networked computing, cultural phenomena, and epidemiological contagion, remarking that the Baby was “sweeping the WorldWide Web with all the momentum of a macrovirus.” See Paul McNamara, “Baby Talk: This Twisting Tot is All the Rage on the ‘Net,” *Network World* 14/24 (16 June 1997): 39.



and You're the Man Now, Dog site (*ytmynd.com*, 2001)—were widely circulated, moved across media forms, platforms, and registers, and underwent mutations into alternate referential versions. All share the loop as a central aesthetic and operational functionality. Additionally, all of these are *musical*—music functions as constitutive component in their core identity as objects. Even if the “objects” in question are a constellation of heterogeneous tokens (perhaps most clearly, the YTMND collection of sites), they cohere through iteration and indexing around a relatively stable identity involving musical sound. Hampster Dance and Whistle Stop; Dancing Baby and Blue Swede's “Hooked on a Feeling”; Badgers and “The Badger Song”; YTMND sites and their famous sounds.

That virally-circulating cultural objects are serious (or have serious economic, political, and cultural implications), that they should be taken seriously, is one of the central arguments of this dissertation. Further, I suggest that many such objects can and should be productively analyzed as music—this and the following chapters seek the cultural meanings of these viral objects *as music*, and use tools of musicological analysis to investigate virality.

In some ways, this dissertation as a whole is about loops—iterating processes that seem to occur over and over again, viral outbreaks of content that become increasingly familiar in their repeating patterns. Loops of creation, publication, explosion, creation, circulation, exhaustion. Loops of digital content modules, popping up over and over again, algorithms re-circulating selected content morsels “in case you missed it.” Loops passing from amateur creators and fans, to hungry journalists, to large-scale corporate media entities.

But not all of these loops are exact. Despite their congruities, and their close temporal relationship, the four case studies of this chapter circulated in relatively distinct modalities and trajectories, a function of occupying particular instances of what Matthew Fuller analyzes as

“media ecologies”—dynamic interrelations of material objects and entities, from e-mail and newsgroups, to GeoCities, to aggregating websites, all intertwined with the remediating efforts of newspaper, television, and the broader offline “meatspace.”<sup>6</sup>

To some extent, the loops featured as *objects* this chapter are particular in their stasis—these aren’t iterating loops that evolve or mutate, spiraling out into forms both novel and predictable. Instead, this chapter centers around exact loops, what Richard Middleton would describe as “*musematic*” or even *monad*-approaching, in their brevity and self-enclosedness.<sup>7</sup> This chapter’s repetitions emerge from .GIF files and <loop> directives, small units of digital content forever exactly repeating—or exactly repeating at least until the encountering user closed or navigated away from the page. By focusing on looping animations and audiovisual objects, I show that early Internet content creators used assumed constraints of bandwidth and their own resources to create simple, absurd creations—in essence, the genesis of the “Internet Ugly” aesthetic, rather than its emulation. The small-unit repetition in these objects, born of necessity, rendered them *musical*—often, repetition functioned to musicalize the non-musical, the barely-musical, or the implied-musical; the oft-cited aesthetic of the surreal, the banal, and the annoying arises in part from this maximalized musical feature.

### **“They Might Have You Committed”: Theorizing Repetition**

As an aesthetic, rhetorical, or behavioral technique, repetition has been theorized with fascination, bemusement, and derision across philosophy, social sciences, and the arts—in

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Middleton, “‘Play It Again Sam’: Some Notes on the Productivity of Repetition in Popular Music,” *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 236.

particular, in terms of its paradoxical capacity for engendering progress or forward movement. In *Repetition*, Søren Kierkegaard's 1843 essay (published under the pseudonym "Constantin Constantius"), the philosopher characterizes repetition as a dynamic, forward-oriented force (contrasted with "recollection," as stasis or regression): "The dialectic of repetition is easy; for what is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but precisely the fact that it has been gives to repetition the character of novelty." For Kierkegaard (or Constantius), where recollection was a visit, repetition constituted a *journey*.<sup>8</sup>

Freud associated repetition with the death drive Thanatos, in opposition to teleological, goal-oriented Eros; in psychoanalytic terms, repetition is understood as a neurotic compulsion, performed in the wake of trauma. Building on Freud's conception, philosophers Jacques Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari and Jean-François Lyotard expounded on the "libidinal" possibilities of repetition. In its avoidance of *telos*, libidinal philosophy suggested repetition as a means through which the human might subvert dialectical struggle and achieve liberatory *jouissance*. And launching forth from Hume's observation that "Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it," Deleuze suggested that "Difference lies between two repetitions," effecting a physically impossible perpetual present.<sup>9</sup>

Another of Deleuze's foundational sources was sociologist Gabriel Tarde, whose work framed repetition as the foundational mechanism for the entirety of biological and social processes. For Tarde, repetition (or "imitation") served as the primary undergirding principle of

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<sup>8</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 1994), 75. See also Jacques Lacan, *Formations of the Unconscious: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (Cambridge: Polity, 2017); Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*; and Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*.

all generative events, with invention erupting as a much-more-infrequent phenomenon from imitation's normative condition. Indeed, Tarde's work on replication—and in particular his suggestion that replicative processes could account for both biological and sociological fact, collapsing boundaries between human and nonhuman, subject and object—proved productive in the development of Bruno Latour's influential actor network theory.<sup>10</sup>

Recent work on repetition as an aesthetic practice has built on various of the above theorizations as frameworks. In such work—for example, recent volumes such as the 2016 *On Repetition: Writing, Performance & Art* and a vein of recent scholarship around animated .GIF files—repetition is often framed as a *problem*.<sup>11</sup> Drawing especially on post-Lacanian notions of *jouissance*, these recent scholarly works on Western visual art, theatre, and film encounter and theorize repetition as marked, as a deviation from an imagined (narrative, teleological, cinematic) norm.

But while repetitive objects, mechanisms, or functionalities might seem vexing in an array of disciplinary, social, or artistic situations, as Elizabeth Margulis claims, “music is the canonical domain of repetition, and when we reinterpret another domain to emphasize its repetitiveness, we are, in fact, examining a quasi-musical aspect of that domain.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Robert Fink notes, “[t]he task of modeling abstract, repetitive structures in time is, of course, one for which music is particularly well suited.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in his 2005 book *Repeating Ourselves*,

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<sup>10</sup> See Bruno Latour, “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social,” in *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, 117-132, ed. Patrick Joyce (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> See *On Repetition*, ed. Erin Kartsaki (Bristol: Intellect, 2016). I discuss the scholarship around the GIF, in particular, in more detail below.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Margulis, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 75.

Fink connects particularly repetitive (and particularly maligned) genres of music in the twentieth century to co-occurring processes in the development of American capitalism. Fink's work in some ways provides an augmentation and counterpoint to Jacques Attali's famous ascription, in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, of repetition as *the* musical feature of the era of mass production—with the capacity to record and repeat music and sound effecting fundamental reorganizations of power, sociality, consumption, and exchange.<sup>14</sup> Theorizing across particular genres emergent in the mid-twentieth century, Fink argues compellingly that “the single-minded focus on repetition and process that has come to define what we think of as ‘minimal music’ can be interpreted as both the sonic analogue and, at times, a sonorous constituent of a characteristic repetitive experience of self in mass-media consumer society.”<sup>15</sup> In *Repeating Ourselves*, Fink reads the concept of repetition through a variety of psychological critiques of advertising from the middle of the twentieth century and beyond; he cites Richard Pollay's suggestion that critiques of advertising center around how it is felt “to blur the distinction between reality and fantasy, producing hypnoid states of uncritical consciousness.”<sup>16</sup>

Such linkages between advertising's repetition, its imagined soporific effect, and its dulling capacities on consumer critical faculties align tidily with critiques of repetition levied against music itself, perhaps most notoriously via Theodor Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleagues. In *Philosophy of Modern Music*, for example, Adorno pilloried Stravinsky's use of ostinato technique as resembling “the schema of catatonic conditions,” linking such conditions

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Attali, “Repeating,” in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, 87-132, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, x.

<sup>16</sup> Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 78.

explicitly to a pathology of schizophrenia, characterized, qua Adorno, by “infinite repetition of gestures or words, following the decay of the ego.”<sup>17</sup> This stance towards repetition also, of course, informed Adorno’s pejorative views on “standardized” popular music, which “hears for the listener,” and “divests the listener of his spontaneity and promotes conditioned reflexes.”<sup>18</sup> Wim Mertens, Fink’s major predecessor in historicizing American minimal music, mirrored such a modality of thought, explicitly contrasting minimal techniques with earlier Western art music, which, for Mertens, had been “characterized by logical-causal development and by climax as the moment of teleological finality.” Minimal music, by contrast, had “no real beginning and no real end, but instead a series of random starting and finishing points. Nor is there a gradual building up of tension or evolution towards a climax.”<sup>19</sup> In theorizing the experience of pleasure in Electronic Dance Music, Luis-Manuel Garcia quotes an effective summation of repetition’s critics from Susan McClary (McClary, Garcia pithily notes, “is paraphrasing Adorno paraphrasing Schoenberg interpreting Freud”)—“if we understand a piece of music as an allegory of personal development, then any reiteration registers as regression—as a failure or even a refusal to keep up the unending struggle for continual growth demanded for successful self-actualization.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Theodor Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 1973), 178.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno and George Simpson, “On Popular Music,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* (New York: Institute of Social Research, 1941), 17-48.

<sup>19</sup> Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983), 124.

<sup>20</sup> Luis-Manuel Garcia, “On and On: Repetition as Process and Pleasure in Electronic Dance Music,” *Music Theory Online* 11/4 (2005). <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.05.11.4/mto.05.11.4.garcia.html>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

But work by Fink, Garcia, and Margulis suggests alternative readings of repetition, outside of interpretations that construe it as regressive and stifling of agency, on the one hand, and readings of it as pure Lacanian *jouissance*, on the other. Fink, in particular, suggests how highly repetitive music might be read as wholly—and even explicative—of its situation within a broader milieu of American mass advertising culture. Framing minimal music as a refining of “pop” music more broadly, Fink suggests:

Pop abstracts the signifier-drenched surface of commodity culture; Minimalism models what Gablik calls its ‘technology,’ its underlying structure. One reflects the sharp-edged juxtaposition of images in a 30-second TV spot; the other, the endless, repetitious pulsation of the ad campaign that deploys 10,000 such spots every week.<sup>21</sup>

My reading of repetition in looping internet phenomena of the 1990s and early 2000s, especially in formats like the animated GIF or protocols like the <loop> functionality for autoplaying musical files, is an expansion on this argument. I interpret the Internet phenomena analyzed below as components in what Fink calls a “culture of repetition,” in which “the extremely high level of repetitive structuring necessary to sustain capitalist modernity becomes salient in its own right, experienced directly as constituent of subjectivity.”<sup>22</sup> I situate looping internet artifacts of the 1990s and 2000s alongside an intensification (and remediation) of the American advertising milieu that, I suggest, parallels the disco and minimalist music of Fink’s analysis. I also understand these looping phenomena as *part* of the “sonorous constituent” of this intensified advertising and consuming environment, and of its circulation and consumption practices. These objects, and the repetitive, iterating patterns of their viral circulation prefigure the more clearly reified repetitive self-fashioning afforded through ubiquitous, networked web platforms (and the

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<sup>21</sup> Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 4.

rise of so-called “platform capitalism”) tracked in the dissertation’s later chapters. Further, my analysis sees and hears the loop as a figuration of a hypnotic digital temporality, a web sublime.

In *Noise*, Attali diagnoses that “[t]he production of repetition requires a new kind of performer, a virtuoso of the short phrase capable of infinitely redoing takes that are perfectible with sound effects.”<sup>23</sup> These “stars of repetition,” Attali suggests, will be “disembodied, ground up, manipulated, and reassembled on record.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, in *Noise* Attali is describing *human* performers, whose unseen voices are remixed to aesthetic perfection through the technologies of the recording studio and editing software—but his description rings accurate as an assessment of the “performance” of loops as code across this chapter’s array of audiovisual objects, all of which were truly capable of infinitely replaying their given short phrases with untiring virtuosity.

The loop is the manifestation of millennial computation as aesthetic—as Manovich states, “[p]rogramming involves altering the linear flow of data through control structures, such as ‘if/then’ and ‘repeat/while’; the loop is the most elementary of these control structures.”<sup>25</sup> As a function of code, or the operating of an algorithm, repeating a loop is just as simple as not-repeating it. “Stop” and “Go again” require the same amount of encoded direction, and the “go again” direction is, by default, infinite. Iterating musical novelties like the camp songs “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall,” or the interlocked melodic loop of “The Song that Never Ends” function as humorous endurance tests for their performers—tests of physical limitations of voice and breath, and tests of mental and emotional limits of boredom and annoyance. But coded instructions for the repetition of a cycled set of images, or a sound file, can be performed

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<sup>23</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 106.

<sup>25</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, xxxiii.



endlessly, without exhaustion, by late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century software. The physical limitations of the “audience” of viewer—limitations manifested in boredom, annoyance, drowsiness—are reached well before those of the computer or digital device “performer,” the exhaustion or decomposition of plastic, metal, and glass hardware and circuitry.

This resonates with what Brian Kane describes as a Kittlerian “anti-humanist vision of a world filled with autonomous data streams, endlessly circulating without concern for human subjects” in his analysis of Internet music. But Kane also suggests that the affordances of the networked web might offer a “unique opportunity create artworks that investigate the implications of the network’s affordances for shaping new artistic practices.”<sup>26</sup> A provocative alternative might be to read the loop as a playful evocation of a nonhuman, digital cosmology. Such a reading resonates with work that scholars like Erin Obdiac and Jussi Parikka have constructed atop Jakob von Uexküll’s proposition of the existence of insect musicologies, cosmologies or *Umwelt*, ordered by and comprehensible through sound.<sup>27</sup> The infinite repetitions of this chapter’s looping objects might suggest a web cosmology (comprised of markup languages and transfer protocols, rather than silken strands of amino acids) comprised of a musical temporality at once limited and infinite, mechanically inexhaustible. Of course, this cosmology operates largely at the level of the human imaginary—these are loops created *by* and intended *for* consumption by other humans and their perceptual faculties, not actually other computers or digital machines. Perhaps it is more realistic to read the loop as an updating of what

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<sup>26</sup> Brian Kane, “Aesthetic Problems of Net Music,” Paper presented at Spark Festival, University of Minnesota, USA, February 20-25, 2007. See Friedrich A. Kittler and Sara Ogger, “Computer Graphics: A Semi-Technical Introduction,” *Grey Room* 2 (Winter 2001): 30-45.

<sup>27</sup> Erin Obdiac, “Insect Musicologies,” *Viralnet.net*, 15 September 2011. <http://viralnet.net/radicalcosmologies/projects/lenczycki.html>. Accessed 30 January 2019.

Allison Wente has theorized as the “machine topic” in early twentieth-century music; in infinitely-repeating digital loops, viewer/listeners could hear technological capacity ambivalently, as both enchantment and threat.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the repeated accounts of human *experience* of these objects as temporal aberrations—viewers staring at them for unaccountable minutes or hours—that suggest the way in which this posthuman temporality might have been deeply and affectively invoked.

Fink suggests that “[p]ure’ control of/by repetition has become a familiar yet unacknowledged aesthetic effect of late modernity, sometimes experienced as pleasurable and erotic, but more often as painfully excessive, alienating, and (thus) sublime.”<sup>29</sup> The discourse around the objects of this chapter features frequent invocations of both sublimity and control—the impossible agency that the objects seem to wield over viewer/listeners, and the ambivalent affect, for viewer/listeners, of indulging in that being-overtaken.

### **From Advertisement to Ally McBeal: Dancing Baby as Uncanny Other**

The phenomenon that came to be known as “Dancing Baby” has its origin point in 1996, with the creation of a demo video file, meant to serve as an advertisement for the capacities of digital imaging software company Kinetix.<sup>30</sup> From that origin point, the file—a computer-

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<sup>28</sup> Allison Wente, “Queue the Roll: Taylorized Labor Practices and Music of the Machine Age,” *Music Theory Online* 24/4 (2018). <http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.18.24.4/mto.18.24.4.wente.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> See “Digits,” *Wall Street Journal* 9 April 1998: B6.

Throughout this section and chapter, I will refer to this phenomenon collectively as Dancing Baby. I acknowledge that various circulating files and versions were referred to by a variety of appellations, from file names like *sk\_baby.max* and *babycha.avi* to more human-readable (and music-indexing) designations like “Baby Cha-Cha” and “Ooga-Chaka Baby.” My attempt to uniformly use Dancing Baby is meant as an attempt at clarity, but should

generated, three-dimensional moving image of a pale humanoid toddler figure, diaper-clad and gyrating—changed format, acquired sound, spread via the internet, and acquired television notoriety. [Figure 3] In this section, I analyze this early-Internet viral artifact in terms of its infamous strangeness, and its particular viral trajectory.



Figure 3: Still of Dancing Baby animation

Perhaps the most frequently-used adjective for the Dancing Baby, in discourse surrounding it, was “uncanny.”<sup>31</sup> The use of this term invoked both Freud’s popularized conception of Ernst Jentsch’s work, and the more recent—and more digitally-specific—“Uncanny Valley” concept, coined by Masahiro Mori and subsequently translated and popularized in the Anglophone world under that coinage.<sup>32</sup> This ascription constituted a response

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not be read as an endeavor meant to collapse these various objects—the fact of their heterogeneity and the heterogeneity of circulating materials and discourses.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, an early *New York Times* coverage of Dancing Baby used Freud as a playful framing device, asking at one point “What would Freud have made of the appeal of a diapered cyberkid with provocative gyrations?” See David Barbosa, “Enter Geekdom’s Diaper Dandy. Sigmund, Can You Explain This?” *The New York Times Cybertimes* 26 January 1998. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/cyber/week/012698baby.html>. Accessed 1 December 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki*, 2/1 (1996). For the Uncanny Valley concept, see Masahiro Mori, “The Uncanny Valley,” Translated by K. F. MacDorman, Norri Kageki, and Masahiro Mori, *IEEE Robotics and Automation*, 19/2 (2012): 98–100. The first usage of “Uncanny Valley” in English was in Jasia Reichardt’s 1978 *Robots: Fact, Fiction, and Prediction*, in which Reichardt offered the now-famous English term as a translation of Mori’s *bukimi no tani*. See Norri Kageki and Masahiro Mori, “An Uncanny Mind: Masahiro Mori on the Uncanny Valley and Beyond,” *Spectrum.ieee.org*, 12

to the file's perceived strangeness, the frisson of un-homeliness resonating between the familiar and the viscerally-wrong in the contours and movements of the onscreen "baby." In reading "Dancing Baby's" much-discoursed-upon strangeness, I argue that this visual uncanny was both undercut and emphasized through virally-accreted musical relations that marked "otherness" to the digital whiteness of the wiggling simulacrum of digital toddler.

Additionally and importantly, the viral trajectory of Dancing Baby differed from many of the online artifacts in this and following chapters, which made their way into "meatspace" (or non-internet circulation) via the mediation of journalistic or press coverage, which was then followed by their adoption into mainstream entertainment media forms. Dancing Baby, instead, reversed this process. The audiovisual artifact jumped directly from internet circulation to widespread extra-internet notoriety through its inclusion in *television*, as a running gag from 1998 onwards in the hit sitcom *Ally McBeal*.

### **Making a Baby Dance**

In the summer of 1996, graphics software company Kinetix rolled out an accessory application to its 3D Studio Max tool suite called Character Studio. The tool was designed and marketed as part of an advance in 3D animation, particularly intended for implementation in websites and digital media. A major feature of this pricey software package (available as a \$1000 add-on to the \$3500 Studio Max package) was a functionality called Biped, which enabled a user to quickly animate a bipedal humanoid or "alien" creature walking a designated path in virtual

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June 2012, <https://spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/robotics/humanoids/an-uncanny-mind-masahiro-mori-on-the-uncanny-valley>. Accessed 12 January 2019.

space.<sup>33</sup> The suite's creators loaded a number of "demo" files with the software, ready-made proofs-of-concept that could impressively and engagingly indicate its capacity for creation. One such demo file, titled "sk\_baby.max," used a "skin" for this animated biped that approximated a hairless, diapered baby, and a motion file for an accompanying dance would render it to do a (silent) set of movements that showed off its dimensions and realistic "human" mobility. The motion file for the dance, which had the character stepping from foot to foot, pivoting around in a circle, articulating rhythmically (but independently) at the elbows and shoulders, was dubbed "cha-cha" by creators Michael Girard and Robert Lure, and was made available to users to manipulate and repurpose as they saw fit, to test the animation software's abilities.<sup>34</sup>

The accessibility of this digital object increased exponentially when other major figures in the technology and design worlds adapted and circulated it. Intrigued by the software artifact—and catalyzed in part by industry reactions of revulsion against it—animator Ron Lussier created what would become the definitive version of the animation, circulating it via e-mail to his colleagues in the industry (and them to theirs, spiraling outwards) in September and October of 1996.<sup>35</sup> Lussier's version circulated in the .AVI file format—a relatively broadly accessible video format—and was soon circulating as an animated .GIF file as well. These new

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<sup>33</sup> See Ken Yamada, "Kinetix Offers 3-D Animation on Net," *Computer Reseller News* 692 (Jul 15, 1996): 10, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/227453430?accountid=10226> (accessed February 2, 2019); Richard Tedesco, "Dancing Baby Gives Kinetix Unexpected Kick," *Broadcasting & Cable* 128/17 (Apr 20, 1998): 87, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/225351964?accountid=10226> (accessed February 2, 2019); Tim Forcade, "Create a Walking Alien with Character Studio," *Computer Graphics World* (August 1996): 87. Via <http://bi.galegroup.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/essentials/article/GALE%7CA18593101?u=columbiau>, accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Greg Lefevre, "Dancing Baby cha-chas from the Internet to the networks," *CNN.com*, 19 January 1998. <http://www.cnn.com/TECH/9801/19/dancing.baby/index.html>. Accessed 1 February 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Ron Lussier, "Dancing Baby FAQ," *dancing-baby.net*, <http://www.dancing-baby.net/BabyFAQ.htm#Q1>. Accessed 1 February 2019.

manifestations of the dancing baby were far less visually manipulable via the plasticity of digital animation, but far *more* amenable to user spread, and to other forms of amateur participation, because of its smaller file size and format (untethered from the expensive Studio Max software); in late 1996, the Dancing Baby video was spread widely via e-mail, forums, and message boards.<sup>36</sup>

While personal e-mail sharing practices are difficult to recover as historical documentation of this sharing, records in Usenet groups suggest some of the circulation of the dancing baby, and its reception. Across a wide variety of groups, the file was shared in .GIF or (more frequently) in .AVI (Audio Video Interleaved) format, the latter capable of delivering both sound and moving image. Usenet groups representing areas and interests as geographically distant as Germany, Nigeria, France, and Brazil mentioned the phenomenon, at that point generally dubbed “Baby Cha-Cha,” and circulated various versions of the file, and news about it.<sup>37</sup> Users in a variety of groups sent the file as a source of humor or provocation, while users in more particularly-focused groups, like those devoted to animation or software, collectively

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<sup>36</sup> One frequently-cited node in Dancing Baby’s history is another format conversion by software developer John Woodell. Woodell is said to have selected Lussier’s video file to use in a demonstration of the process of converting a movie file format to a highly-compressed looping animated .GIF file. The story goes that Woodell circulated the newly-created GIF to his own colleagues as part of a demonstration of the file conversion process, furthering the file’s spread. It is difficult, however, to precisely track the source of this bit of narrative, though it has circulated widely in discourse surrounding “Dancing Baby”—and, thereby, in discourse situating memes as cultural phenomena more broadly—since the 2010s. One likely reason for the broad citation of this as fact is likely due to its inclusion on the Know Your Meme page for Dancing Baby. See “Dancing Baby,” *Knowyourmeme.com*, posted 19 June 2009, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/dancing-baby>. Accessed 2 February 2019. That said, while the GIF format was certainly important, and will be discussed later in this chapter and throughout the dissertation, much of the major circulation (and mutation) of Dancing Baby occurred via .avi file formats.

<sup>37</sup> The example of the sharing of “Baby Cha-Cha” to the soc.culture.nigeria group represents a relatively early instance of the file’s circulation. The poster suggests that her fellow “Villagers” watch the file for its strangeness: “This is too weird (There’s no sound to it). Save to your harddrive and view it with any avi media player.” See kogb...@aracnet.com, “(Fwd) FW: baby cha cha,” *soc.culture.nigeria*, 9 December 1996: Message ID 199612100526.VAA14614@trapdoor.aracnet.com. Via [https://groups.google.com/forum/?hl=en#!search/%22baby\\$20cha\\$20cha%22|sort:relevance/soc.culture.nigeria/kbdv3dk\\_7U/2OESMpPhqE8J](https://groups.google.com/forum/?hl=en#!search/%22baby$20cha$20cha%22|sort:relevance/soc.culture.nigeria/kbdv3dk_7U/2OESMpPhqE8J). Accessed 13 January 2018.

sleuthed out a history and a methodology of creation for the circulating file, often alongside critiques of its obnoxiousness and creepiness.

Through wider accessibility of file format, the dancing baby moved from a stratum of professionals in the graphic design world to the hands of amateurs; users referred to “Baby Cha-Cha” or “that dancing baby” to refer to the phenomenon, as a proliferation of variously-named files were created, traded, and shared using the animation. Centrally, teenager Rob Sheridan created a website, in late 1996, that was dedicated to hosting the file. Having the file available for download in a stable web location was, at that time, relatively unusual for content of the Dancing Baby variety. In an autobiographical blog post that Sheridan would write twenty years later, he characterized the situation of a mid-1990s search for content online:

Unlike today’s instantly-searchable web, finding specific content in the wild west 90s internet was an excruciating but exciting archeological expedition - and often, the best discoveries happened accidentally along the way... Video clips were cumbersome things stored in AVI and MPG files, massive by dial-up standards (a couple megabytes was a huge file) but microscopic by modern video standards (240 x 180 at 15fps, for example). You could only find them as downloads, most commonly via FTP, usenet, or BBS servers: cold text-only listings of files devoid of previews or context. Finding well-curated servers was key to finding fun random stuff in this digital frontier, and I scavenged as many as I could, often waiting 20 minutes to see what “funny.avi” was, only to find a 10-second video of a skateboarder falling over, or “sexy.avi,” only to find a poorly-digitized clip of a swimsuit model.<sup>38</sup>

Sheridan fully inhabits the persona of an explorer in a digital “frontier” in this excerpt, highlighting the exigencies of bandwidth and data limits that characterized most amateur computing assemblages of the time, as well as the limits of access to reliable metadata about shared files.

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<sup>38</sup> Rob Sheridan, “I Have a Confession to Make,” Patreon.com 24 January 2018. <https://www.patreon.com/posts/16584611>. Accessed 2 January 2019.

Emerging from this archeological milieu, Sheridan narrates his discovery of the Dancing Baby as an internet object:

my afterschool file-scavenging led me to “babycha2.avi” on a newsgroup, described without context as “weird baby dancing” or something like that. I downloaded it and discovered, to my teenage delight, a hideously creepy bald humanoid CGI toddler cha-cha-ing on a black background; no music, no text, no explanation for why it existed or where it came from. The baby was extremely realistic by 1997 standards, rendered in lavish detail at 260x200/30fps, which I described as “hi-resolution” at the time. But it was the baby’s cold dead eyes that shook me, the way it stared expressionless into a black void while it danced nightmarishly through the Uncanny Valley with its weird Benjamin Button body; a ragdoll flesh puppet made by sinister digital masters who forced it to twirl for their amusement. It was as off-putting as it was hypnotizing, perhaps a perfect prophetic metaphor for the shallow but novel alternate reality the internet would eventually foster. At the time though, it was nothing more or less than exactly the type of bizarre little oddity that brought morbid delight to a 17 year old boy.<sup>39</sup>

Sheridan posted this “bizarre little oddity” to his own personal site, a common practice in “blogging” of the era. Before the advent of the 2000s-era version of diary- or journal-style “blogging” (in part afforded through the standardizing adoption of free and accessible online software like Blogger), early amateur and personal pages were often largely used for the curation and storage of links to other content, archiving and displaying that content both for the user and for an imagined audience of other users with similar interests. Rebecca Blood and Ignacio Siles have characterized such usage as “filtering”—Blood suggests how, via this mode of blogging, “[t]he web has been, in effect, pre-surfed for [other non-blogging users]. Out of the myriad web pages slung through cyberspace, weblog editors pick out the most mind-boggling, the most stupid, the most compelling.”<sup>40</sup> From Blood’s and Siles’s analyses comes an early internet

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<sup>39</sup> Sheridan, “I Have a Confession to Make.”

<sup>40</sup> Rebecca Blood, “Weblogs: A History and Perspective,” in *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs are Changing Our Culture*, 7-16, ed. J Rodzvilla (Cambridge: Perseus, 2002), 9; Ignacio Siles, “From online filter to web format: Articulating materiality and meaning in the early history of blogs,” *Social Studies of Science* 41/5 (2011): 737-758.



instance of “filtration” designed to keep (potentially-)viral content *in*, to *promote* its contagious circulation through an online populace, rather than filtering it *out*. Ultimately, this is what Sheridan’s hosting of Dancing Baby on his site succeeded in doing—filtering *in* Dancing Baby, and increasing its potential for viral spread.

In the above description of finding the Dancing Baby file, given more than a decade after the zenith of Dancing Baby circulation, Sheridan articulates the “Uncanny Valley” affect as part of its appeal. As a “prophetic metaphor,” the Dancing Baby offered a grim vision of a digital future ruled by puppeteering loops, entertaining but unsettling, slippery and manipulable, but superficially so. While Sheridan describes the file he downloaded as silent, having no music, it was clearly understood by its growing Internet user audience to be musical—its “dance” clearly (and eerily) connected to a music perhaps inaudible to human ears. Indeed, I argue that the “silence” of the Dancing Baby animation stands in for a particularly troubling void that music is used to fill.

The discourse around Dancing Baby continuously re-trod anxiously around a perceived lack of meaning in the animation, in an unconscious echoing of Attali’s suggestion of the contemporary “impossibility of communication in repetition...although this void sometimes leaves room for a message, because the listener can make associations or try to create his own order in the void.”<sup>41</sup> Commentators and amateur circulators repeatedly *sought* meaning in the otherwise inexplicable mass fascination with this object—a theme that itself repeats across the

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Blood recognizes that this description doesn’t accord closely with the then-increasingly-common usage of “weblog” or “blog” to characterize a more diaristic document or format, lamenting, “I really wish there were another term to describe the filter-style weblog, one that would easily distinguish it from the blog” (Blood, “Weblogs,” 15). Blood cites the platforms Metafilter and Blogger as token platforms for the two styles of blog: Metafilter as affording filter-style blogging, and Blogger affording journal-style.

<sup>41</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 114.

vignettes and case studies in this dissertation. Leveraging theories of the uncanny and “plasmaticness” from animation scholarship, in articulation with theories of voice and ventriloquism, I will next outline how *music* provided a partial solution to this problem of strangeness, meaninglessness, and lack—or at least a possibility of ordering the Dancing Baby void.

### **Animation, Automation, and the Uncanny**

Scholarship on animation provides some useful avenues of approach to the Dancing Baby as a problematic object. Animation scholarship has tended to frame the genre in terms of an ambivalent “plasticity” or “plasmaticness”—Eisenstein’s term for the animated object’s “ability to dynamically assume any form”—a dead liveness or a living deadness, a bodily fantasy of exceeding bodily boundaries and capacities.<sup>42</sup> Such a theorization champions animation as uniquely dynamic and mutable, and subsequent scholars like Tom Gunning and Lev Manovich have argued that animation therefore be considered not a *subset* of cinema and moving image technology, but the reverse—its containing category. Both enumerate ways in which animation, as a technique, mirrors “plasmatic process[es] of transformation” in twentieth- and twenty-first-century media and technology more broadly.<sup>43</sup> Such a suggestion is borne out by the objects in this chapter, whose mutability is a fundamental component of their circulation as internet

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<sup>42</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Naum Kleinman (New York: Methuen, 1998): 21.

<sup>43</sup> Tom Gunning, “The Transforming Image: The Roots of Animation in Metamorphosis and Motion,” in *Pervasive Animation*, edited by Suzanne Buchan (New York: Routledge, 2013): 56. See also Lev Manovitch, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002): 298-300.

content.<sup>44</sup> But these objects are also, paradoxically, quite *immutable* as animations, fixed as they are in short, rigid tracks of infinite loop.

In an analysis of twenty-first-century dialectics of automation and animation, Vivian Sobchack suggests a connection, both historical and conceptual, between animation “both generally as an idea and particularly as a cinematic form,” and “the posthuman,” in which:

[t]his “post” articulates a primary shift in cultural consciousness and human labour from the mechanically automated to the electronically autonomous, and pointing to our present existence in a transitional moment, its imagination uneasily located (again to use a term central to animation) “in between” future and past, gain and loss, promise and nostalgia, animate and inanimate – and, of course, life and death.<sup>45</sup>

Sobchack’s binaries evoke the spectre of Freud and the uncanny, frequently deployed in theorizations of animation’s lively deadness—what Bill Brown calls a “routinization of the uncanny.”<sup>46</sup> Paul Flaig argues that humor, as a response to animation’s uncanny, operates as the flipped side of the affective coin to horror and revulsion.<sup>47</sup> Despite its location outside of the narrative world of animation to which these scholars are largely attending, *Dancing Baby* is an almost too-perfect embodiment (pun intended) of this constellation of claims: a human-software-generated hybrid, meant as a demonstration of advances in animation technology, prompting mass online affect in oscillations between disgust and delight.

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<sup>44</sup> It is not coincidental, I believe, that animation would become a flashpoint new frontier around this time for legacy media creators and advertising strategists alike. See Lee Dannacher, “Quenching the New Millennium’s Thirst for Animated Fare,” *Animation World Network*, 1 January 2000. <https://www.awn.com/animationworld/quenching-new-millenniums-thirst-animated-fare>.

<sup>45</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “Animation and Automation, or, the Incredible Effortfulness of Being,” *Screen*, 50/4 (2009): 375–391. (378)

<sup>46</sup> Bill Brown, “How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story),” *Critical Inquiry* 24/4 (1998): 935–964. (962)

<sup>47</sup> Paul Flag, “Life Driven by Death: Animation Aesthetics and the Comic Uncanny,” *Screen* 54/1 (2013): 1–19.

This perceived ambivalence between living and death also resonates with the viral metaphor itself, with problematically willful, vital entities—be they biological or cultural—operating at odds with living cells, sentient beings. In some ways, music serves as a remediating agent for these viral objects, to use the term coined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin. Bolter and Grusin use “remediation” in which media forms are made to co-operate, despite seemingly contradictory operating logics, to both amplify themselves and to erase their status as media.<sup>48</sup> As will become clear, users approaching Dancing Baby—and other uncanny or bizarre internet objects—would use the medium of music to render the animated media more palatable, comprehensible—and ultimately viral.

In film historian Scott Curtis’s attempts to rehabilitate oft-derided “Mickey Mousing” techniques, he forwards an understanding of sound and image in animated media that eschews the hierarchies that pertain in non-animated moving image media. In Curtis’s analysis, “the entire shape of a cartoon is complemented and determined by the music.”<sup>49</sup> Crucially, Curtis suggests that this relation is evidenced through the formal feature of *repetition*:

[m]ost conspicuous in animation, though, is the way in which images are repeated in order to fit the music. Repetition is one of the hallmark of studio animation, both in terms of representation and actual construction. Thousands of drawings—the same effects repeated again and again—are required for a single cartoon. In the cartoons themselves, backgrounds are repeated as characters chase one another, even in finite spaces: the inside of a house may be elongated to fit the duration of the chase. Characters repeat actions over and over again: the motif of the assembly line is especially exemplary...the theme of mechanization and repetition metaphorically reminds us of the routine of image generation in an animation studio. The assembly line motif echoes the rhythm of the work image generation, but it is also a more particular instance of the larger patterns of repetition in a cartoon. This repetition, occurring at discrete intervals and in distinguishable units, is the visual equivalent of the repeated patterns of the music. The

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<sup>48</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Scott Curtis, “The Sound of Early Warner Bros. Cartoons” in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, edited by Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992): 200.

actions, mise-en-scène, and motifs of the animated cartoon's image track duplicate and are determined by the sound track.<sup>50</sup>

In this theorization, Curtis neatly suggests how repetition, as a structuring musical feature that orders the visual events of a piece of animated media, serves to foreground (perhaps, to make audible) both the mechanics of animation as a process, and issues of labor and mechanization more broadly. This is a common point raised by animation scholars; Kristin Thompson refers to the “constant reminder of the mechanical magic of the motion picture apparatus”<sup>51</sup> within cel animation, and in *The Poetics of Slumberland*, Scott Bukatman maps the dead/liveliness division onto the ambivalent question of animation's (in)visible labor, suggesting that “animation as an *idea* speaks to life, autonomy, movement, freedom, while animation as a *mode of production* speaks to division of labor, precision of control, abundances of preplanning, the preclusion of the random.”<sup>52</sup> I would argue, that the objects in this chapter suggest an updating of this framework, one which preserves intersections between music, ambivalent vitality, and labor. The looped repetitions of digital objects within this chapter and dissertation suggest themselves as musical (if naively so), while simultaneously foregrounding their medial status as digital objects within an infrastructure of code and digital processing, limitless mechanical repetition and limited bandwidth.

Finally, while Eisenstein and those following him understood animation to be a projection of bodily desires of plastic, extra-bodily fantasy, film historian Nicholas Sammond has

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<sup>50</sup> Curtis, “The Sound of Early Warner Bros. Cartoons,” 200.

<sup>51</sup> Kristin Thompson, “Implications of the Cel Animation Technique,” in *The Cinematic Apparatus* 106-120, edited by Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980): 109.

<sup>52</sup> Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012): 108.

connected precisely that animating desire to fantasies underpinning the performance and reception of blackface minstrelsy—“[t]he minstrel’s body — fluid, voracious, and libidinal — represented a freedom from the constraints of Protestant middle-class morality.”<sup>53</sup> Lauren M. Jackson has suggested ways in which contemporary cartoons that operate within an aesthetic that celebrates the weird, the unbounded, and the grotesque have “flip[ped] the script on minstrelsy,” despite a historical relation to it.<sup>54</sup> In the argument that follows, I do not suggest that looping Internet animations—and their various musical mutations—are directly reflective of or consciously emergent from a minstrelsy history.<sup>55</sup> As I will show, however, the standard practices of musical “mutation” or remix for such objects at times defaulted to the production of humor through parodic juxtapositions marked by race and difference.

Music, additionally, offered a comprehensible explanation for the stickiness and spread of such incomprehensible banalities, or at least supplied a history for it. Music had long been catchy and viral; musicality now helped to explain the otherwise inexplicable appeal of a strangely lively, quasi-silent Internet object. Understood and circulated as potentially-musical, it was in the move to formats like .GIF and .AVI that the Dancing Baby was indelibly linked with its most

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<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 27.

<sup>54</sup> Lauren M. Jackson, “How Today’s Most Daring, Weird Cartoons Transform the Minstrel Aesthetic,” *Vulture*, 7 December 2017. <http://www.vulture.com/2017/12/weird-cartoons-today-transform-minstrel-aesthetic.html>. Accessed 21 August 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Jackson concludes her *Vulture* piece by noting that “Minstrelsy’s residual influence is the impulse toward the unruly, but the influx of global influences changes the nature of the impulse...And while it would be impossible for these weird cartoons to exist without an American minstrel tradition, today’s most artistically daring shows remake that legacy in a way that might be considered reparative of what once was.” Jackson, “How Today’s Most Daring, Weird Cartoons Transform the Minstrel Aesthetic.”

iconic sonic component: Swedish rock band Blue Swede's 1974 cover of "Hooked on a Feeling."<sup>56</sup>

### **Dancing Babies: Vocalic Bodies, Skins of Voices**

Attribution for the most famous Dancing Baby version—the animated Baby overlaid with the introduction to the Blue Swede hit—is unclear. Many people, especially in the period around 1996-1999, attributed it to Sheridan himself, in part because he hosted this version prominently on his site. His own account of discovery and hosting, however, seems to contradict such an attribution. Indeed, in the summer of 1997, Sheridan's site hosted a contest to promote the creation of a variety of versions of the dance that included music, to "see who could give the Dancing Baby music that fit his dance perfectly."<sup>57</sup>

Such a contest offered a relatively simple method of viral-musicking participation: users could overlay a musical track of their choice onto the animation file. Of course, there were certainly versions circulated that manipulated the visual dimension of the baby; one famous example was the so-called "Drunken Baby," in which the creator had used software manipulation to render a version of the baby that moved with sideways lurches at the hips, swaying shoulders,

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<sup>56</sup> "Hooked on a Feeling" was written in 1968 by Mark James and first recorded by B.J. Thomas.

<sup>57</sup> Rob Sheridan, "Information: Dancing Baby Contest Winners," *babinfo.htm*, Captured 6 August 1997. Accessed 12 December 2018 via Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/19970806201918/http://www.nwlink.com:80/~xott/babinfo.htm#contest>.

The text of Sheridan's page revealing the contest winners was dedicated to 1) explanation of the content, both audio and visual, of each video and 2) relatively detailed instructions for downloading and accessing the files for each version, including links to download relevant software and plug-ins. The first component speaks to Sheridan's awareness of problems in online filesharing in his page's contemporary environment—recalling his blog post's description of the excavatory (and, often, fruitless) effort involved in trawling through and downloading anonymous or poorly-described files. The second component of the page's text speaks to the realities of the craggy, effortful nature of managing and articulating file formats, browsers, and operating systems under late-1990s regimes of low bandwidth and un-seamless conversion at the level of software and the user interface.

and dragging arms.<sup>58</sup> However, such alterations required both a significant degree of specialist ability, and the capital to acquire expensive 3D graphics software. Transformations or mutations of the Dancing Baby file that involved overlaying new musical tracks were comparatively simple and cheap for amateur users. The versions that Sheridan highlighted in the subsequent promotion of the contest's results, along with versions produced and circulated elsewhere, suggest the Dancing Baby's musicality, and the particular affordances of music in the circulation of this artifact: to clarify through rhythmic and gestural matching, or to surprise through clever sonic juxtaposition.

But the choices of music made by the participants were telling. Submissions for the contest included versions set to Yello's "Oh Yeah," Earth, Wind and Fire's "Let's Groove," and War's 1975 track "Lowrider." One was set to a techno track called "Shake That A\*\* Girl," while another popular manipulation, entitled "Rasta Baby," was set to Ziggy Marley's 1989 "Look Who's Dancing." These interpretations could be most generously said to be advancing meaning and effecting humor through juxtaposition: pairing a musical track that would be as contradictory as possible to the Dancing Baby's shimmying body, while still aligning with its movements. In a way, these sonic provisions "solved" or "remediated" the "problem" of Dancing Baby's "uncanny," providing a familiar audible background against which the disturbingly (un)familiar gyrating toddler might be heard and seen as a humorous response.

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<sup>58</sup> In a fascinating discussion from a graphics-based Usenet group about variations on the Dancing Baby phenomenon, several members voice their disgust with videos that render animations of the Baby in ways that are understood to be violent or harmful. These arguments often suggest that, despite the uncanny or "creepy" quality of the realism in the 3D rendering, it also affords a degree of verisimilitude that renders abuse against the animation to read as horrific, because of its inescapable proximity to a human baby. See "Break Dancing Baby..." in *comp.graphics.apps.lightwave*, 9 April 2019-13 April 2019. <https://groups.google.com/d/topic/comp.graphics.apps.lightwave/CibXwbx5Z3c/discussion>. Accessed 2 January 2019.



Such musical application ventriloquized Dancing Baby, setting comprehensibly-human song into the void of its troublingly quasi-human animated looping. In theorizing ventriloquized envoicing, Steven Connor suggests that an acousmatic or ventriloquist voice produces what he terms a “vocalic body,” a “dream, fantasy, ideal” of a “surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice.”<sup>59</sup> But the celebrated voices applied to Dancing Baby suggest the evocations of very particular kinds of bodies, especially those of Black men—the voices (and genre markers) of performers “partly supply” bodies very different from that present onscreen in the form of the Baby. Atop the animated “skin” of “sk\_baby.max” was projected what Pooja Rangan has called the “skin of the voice,” a construction that emphasizes the “racialized and gendered perceptual frames that mediate the production and reception of vocal sounds.”<sup>60</sup> The “skin of the voice” is a perceptual phenomenon resulting from disciplined listening practices “that forcibly relocate voices whose traits depart from [the norm of white and male] in a racialized and gendered body.” The circulated versions of Dancing Baby located their humor precisely in what Rangan describes as “the prospect of a (racialized) body whose skin threatens to assert its vocal presence, “outing” or disacousmatizing the body even in its visual absence.”<sup>61</sup> The Baby—clearly marked as young and white—was made to perform the ironic vocal presence of a very different racialized body.

In mapping singing voices of funk, soul, and reggae onto the Baby, the makers of these videos—largely young white men—achieved a vernacular deployment of what Nina Sun

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<sup>59</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35.

<sup>60</sup> Pooja Rangan, “The Skin of the Voice: Acousmatic Illusions, Ventriloquial Listening,” in *Sound Objects*, 130-150, edited by James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); 132.

<sup>61</sup> Rangan, “Skin of the Voice,” 135

Eidsheim calls “acousmatic blackness,” in which “even under acousmatic circumstances, the absent, visibly ‘other’ bodies of black singers were conjured up as a perceptual phantom projected by listeners onto their vocal timbre.”<sup>62</sup> Each Baby version that mapped on a vocal track produced a second, imagined body, and the vast majority of these bodies, these vocalic bodies and second skins, were those of adult Black men—in effect, a much of the musical reconfiguration around Dancing Baby constituted performances of digital acousmatic blackface. The “secondary body” here, used to effect laughter and spur humorous recirculation, was often crafted through juxtaposition rooted in racist histories of animation and spectacle.

The song with which the animation has been most consistently associated—Swedish rock band Blue Swede’s 1974 cover of “Hooked on a Feeling”—is in many ways an extension and culmination of what those suggestions thematized. These various manipulations suggested a landscape of imagined vocalic bodies (and embodied vocalities) for the Baby. In particular, the most iconic marker of Blue Swede’s “Hooked on a Feeling”—its chanted opening—indexes racialized, “primitive” sonic tropes drawn from a long history of racist American and British novelty song creation. “Hooked on a Feeling” was originally written in 1968 by Mark James and performed by B. J. Thomas, but the version by Blue Swede achieved greater success and recurring popular circulation, hitting number 1 on the United States Billboard charts in 1974. In part, the Blue Swede version of the track was notable for its sonically-distinct introduction, an unaccompanied chorus of low male voices chanting “Ooga-chaka, ooga-chaka.”

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<sup>62</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera,” *American Quarterly* 63/3 (2011): 641-671; Rangan, “Skin of the Voice,” 135.

Blue Swede borrowed this technique from a slightly earlier version of the track, released in 1971 by Jonathan King.<sup>63</sup> In King's self-published autobiography, he described the introduction as both "one of my cleverer arrangements," as well as "six guys grunting like gorillas."<sup>64</sup> Though King himself denies the linkage, this addition of sonically-striking non-semantic vocal technique, purposely indexing racialized notions of "the primitive" has resonances in earlier popular and "novelty" songs.<sup>65</sup> In particular, King's addition shares sonic and connotative features with techniques used in Johnny Preston's 1959 hit recording of the song "Running Bear." "Running Bear"—a ballad narrating the tragic love of Running Bear (a "young Indian brave") and Little White Dove (an "Indian maid"), youths from opposing tribes, separated by a river—held the No. 1 Billboard Hot 100 spot for three weeks in January 1960.<sup>66</sup> In the recording, background vocals were provided by the song's author Jiles Perry Richardson—aka The Big Bopper—George Jones, and session producer Bill Hall. Richardson, Jones and Hall contributed a repeated chant of "uga uga" pitched to the simple contour of the song's verses. The guttural chanting evoked an "exotic" sound that highlighted the lyrics' content and the song's

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<sup>63</sup> King is a serial child predator, and has been charged on multiple occasions with seducing and molesting young boys; King was convicted and jailed for one such set of charges in 2001. See "Jonathan King jailed for child sex abuse," *The Guardian* 21 November 2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/nov/21/childprotection.society>.

<sup>64</sup> King, 65: *My Life So Far* (London: Revvolution Publishing, 2009). Unfortunately for King, his arrangement wasn't protected by copyright, and he "made not a penny" from the Blue Swede cover.

<sup>65</sup> In a comment on his blog's message board, King refutes this association, stating in response to a user's question whether it was "at all inspired by the 'uga uga' in Johnny Preston's 'Running Bear'" with the answer "Nope not inspired by any other record; just wanted different instruments to make a reggae rhythm and decided on male voices." See exchange between @fourfour and @JK2006, "TOPIC: Top Two Most Talked About Hits..." *Kingofhits.co.uk*, September 2014. [http://www.kingofhits.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_kunena&Itemid=65&func=view&catid=5&id=118642#119309](http://www.kingofhits.co.uk/index.php?option=com_kunena&Itemid=65&func=view&catid=5&id=118642#119309). Accessed 12 January 2019.

<sup>66</sup> The song was possibly driven to chart-topping status in part by the death of its creator; the infamous plane crash that killed The Big Bopper, along with Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens occurred in February of 1959, and the record was released a few months later, in August.

setting (otherwise unmarked in the song's highly Western-conventional melody, harmony, and form).

The 1971 and 1974 versions of “Hooked on a Feeling” made even more marked usage of a similar device. In both versions, the opening chanting of “ooga-chaka” functioned as a kind of double-otherness. Its non-English syllables, repeated short loops, and the ragged, gravelly timbre of the voices performing it linked to an archive of Western sonic imaginaries of racialized “primitive” musical practice. Secondly, such features, as well as the loud volume of the voices, the pointedness of their repeated glottal attacks, the lack of distinct pitch, and the absence of any synthesized or acoustic instrumental sounds, marked the opening as decidedly distinct from contemporary pop music's standard sonic palette. As an opening, this double difference marked the song as sonically separate from its surroundings, whether on the radio, among circulating files on the internet, or in the soundtrack of a hit television show. With the introduction of the song's opening lines (“I can't stop this feeling/Deep inside of me/Girl you just don't realize what you do to me”) over the continuation of the chant as “accompaniment,” the juxtaposition might suggest that what the “Girl” “does to me [the singer, or his male listener stand-in]” is evoke a “primitive” or “savage” romantic or sexual response—leveraging further stereotypes of racialized hypersexuality as well, while keeping the song's lyrics prim and safe, unlikely to meet the scrutiny of radio or other censors.

The chanted opening of “Hooked on a Feeling” iterated a sonic signature for primitive non-whiteness, passed through the hands (or the ears, and mouths, and recording studios) of successive cohorts of white men. In both its internet circulation and its adoption for use in the television show *Ally McBeal*, I read the wildly successful linkage of “Hooked on A Feeling” and the Dancing Baby animation to be both a move that “familiarized” the unfamiliar of the Baby's

uncanny computer-generated body through popular music, and a move that *reinforced* the Baby's strangeness through the music's invocation of the imagined racialized other. It is notable that such efforts confirmed pre-existing discourse of the Dancing Baby's markedly non-white musicality, rather than initiating the linkage. The original software nomenclature of "cha-cha" might to some extent explain the prevalence of news reporting's usage of the word "boogaloo"—a Puerto Rican, African-American influenced music and dance fad of the 1960s—as their synonym of choice for the verb "dance."<sup>67</sup> Once the Blue Swede track was introduced in Internet circulation, files that contained both the Dancing Baby and the Blue Swede accompaniment were often named things like "ugachaka.avi." Despite the Baby's very visible whiteness, non-white racialized sonic rhetoric emerged from and—was inscribed *in*—the phenomenon's circulating metadata.

As noted earlier, the origin of the match between the Baby animation and the Blue Swede track is unknown. Regardless, the match would be made indelible in 1998, by the transmission of Dancing Baby as virus through the vector of television.

### **Dancing Baby Televised: Moving to "Meatspace" through *Ally McBeal***

On January 5, 1998, the television show *Ally McBeal* introduced the first use of what would become a recurring audiovisual gambit: announced by the exaggerated, unaccompanied "ooga-chaka" chants of the Blue Swede "Hooked on a Feeling" track, the Dancing Baby

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<sup>67</sup> See Greg Lefevre, "Dancing Baby Cha-chas From the Internet to the Networks," *CNN.com*, 19 January 1998. <http://www.cnn.com/TECH/9801/19/dancing.baby/index.html>. Accessed 2 December 2018. See also David Barbosa, "Enter Geekdom's Diaper Dandy. Sigmund, Can You Explain This?" *The New York Times Cybertimes* 26 January 1998. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/cyber/week/012698baby.html>. Accessed 1 December 2018. For "boogaloo," see Juan Flores, "'Cha Cha with A Backbeat': Songs and Stories of Latin Boogaloo," *Black Renaissance* 2/2 (1999): 22-38.

appeared to titular protagonist McBeal, in a surreal dream sequence meant to symbolically evoke her anxieties about her “biological clock.” The bit hit. The show’s enthusiastic fans went digging on the internet for information about the strange apparition, and the buzzing interest—as well as the revelation of the Dancing Baby’s infamy in online circles—rendered it newsworthy.

Following the Baby’s inclusion on *Ally McBeal*, a *CNN* web report—aptly titled “Dancing Baby cha-chas from the Internet to the networks,” suggested that it was Dancing Baby’s presence in a high-profile television show that had bridged a gap between an imagined Internet sphere and a separate offline culture. The report concluded, “But the baby isn’t just a Web thing anymore. The child has been let out of cyberspace, and into the mainstream.”<sup>68</sup> Or, as Sheridan suggested, it was “the first meme to truly permeate meatspace.”<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, the Dancing Baby’s mode of viral transmission did not include a mediating stage of journalistic discourse between Internet infamy and mass media cooption. Instead, *Ally McBeal* producer David E. Kelley pulled the Baby directly from the Internet to use in the show (already known and celebrated for its surreal use of formal and audiovisual effects).<sup>70</sup> This high-profile mass media usage of Dancing Baby accompanied by the Blue Swede track solidified the suture of the two as sound and image, locking a particular vocalic body into place for the uncanny object. Furthermore, the inclusion of Dancing Baby on such a widely-viewed television show ultimately resulted in the reinvigoration of viral circulation, the contagion of whole new populations, as journalists comprehended the Baby as a worthy feature to spread to news-

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<sup>68</sup> Lefevre, “Dancing Baby Cha-chas From the Internet to the Networks.”

<sup>69</sup> Rob Sheridan, “I Have a Confession to Make.”

<sup>70</sup> See Jennifer Weiner, “Making McBeal Surreal,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* 11 January 1999: C5.

viewing audiences, and as *Ally McBeal* fans turned to online forums and bulletin boards to seek out the origins and musical iterations of the Dancing Baby.

Viral Internet artifacts were widely celebrated across the 1990s and early 2000s for their origination as amateur productions, accidentally and explosively being exposed to large audiences. It is somewhat ironic, then, that one of the earliest and most centrally-canonized viral objects had its origins in a professional trade tool, playfully (mis)used by amateurs only once translated into more accessible formats.<sup>71</sup> A subsequent viral phenomenon would hew more closely to the standard mythical origin story, but would be similarly lauded and derided for its befuddling compulsion and curiously ensorcelling animated loops.

### **Hamster Dance: Dance the Night Away**

In early 2000, a nationally-televised commercial began with a solid bright orange screen. Text appeared across in white—a URL—but a clued-in Internet user of the time wouldn't have needed the printed address to know what website was being referenced. That's because the commercial's overlaid music was even more iconic: a string of nonsense syllables in a manic, chirpy timbre. Some commercial viewers might have recognized the tune as a sped-up version of Roger Miller's "Whistle Stop." Some might have recognized that tune from its famous inclusion in the 1973 Disney animated film *Robin Hood*. Likely, though, most of the commercial's viewers recognized the nasally musical chirps from the internet object indexed by the commercial's opening URL: [hamsterdance.com](http://hamsterdance.com). The Hamster Dance.

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<sup>71</sup> This misuse was nonetheless advantageous for an array of corporate creators, of course, whose software received a great deal of notoriety, free publicity, and brand recognition—not to mention sales that might have accrued through particularly well-off musickers buying their software in the wake of the phenomenon.

In the commercial, shots of a turn-of-the-millennium-era desktop computer intersperse with closeups of the computer's screen, on which animated creatures move about in lines. No humans are present in any of the commercial's shots, but the setting is clearly an office, indexed by the presence of low grey cubicle walls, a cup of takeout coffee. This setting is invoked in the closing line of the commercial's voiceover, the slightly sardonic tones of a young white man speaking over the music as it repeats, again and again: "At Earthlink, we believe the internet can change the way you live...not to mention the way you annoy the crap out of the person in the next cubicle."

This commercial aired as part of an early-2000 advertising campaign for Internet service provider Earthlink, as part of the company's bid to take on the reigning market titan America Online (AOL).<sup>72</sup> In featuring the Hampster Dance, the EarthLink ad emphasized the brand's relationship to humor and current Internet culture, tethering the web brand to what was then one of the most famous and well-circulated online phenomena of the time: a simple single-serving webpage filled with dizzying, trivial, obnoxious loops. [Figure 4]

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<sup>72</sup> See Angela Dawson, "BBDO Takes EarthLink National," *AdWeek* 10 January 2000. <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/bbdo-takes-earthlink-national-36852/> Accessed 2 October 2018.



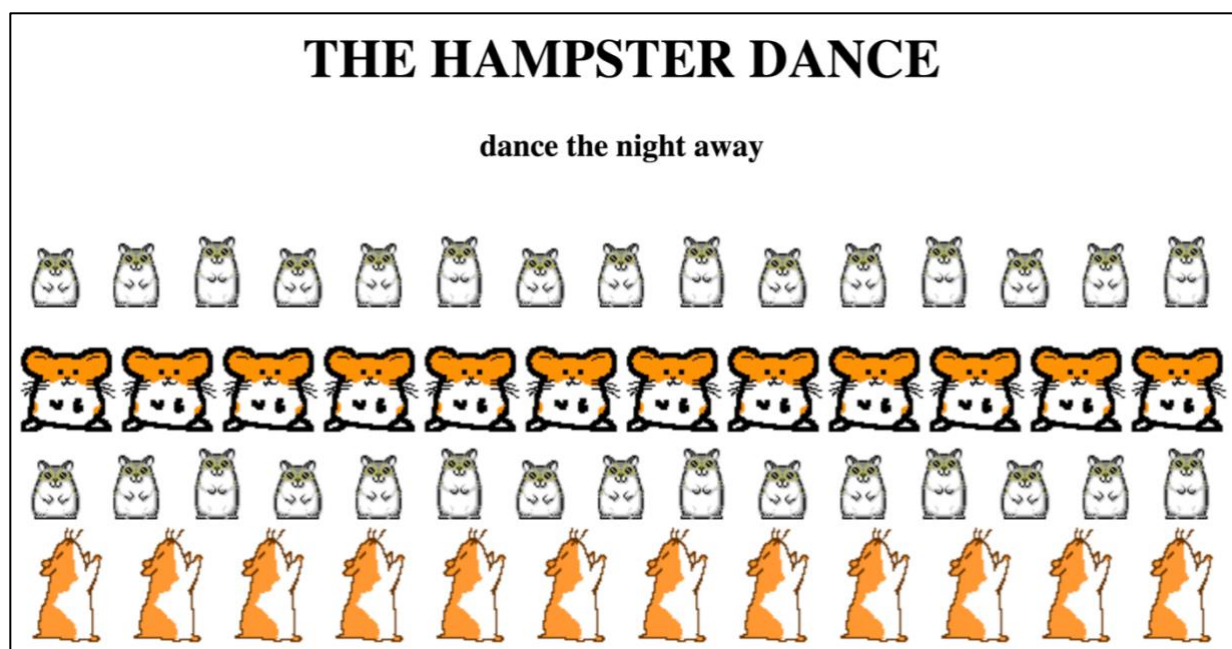


Figure 4: Still of *The Hamster Dance* site

A few years later, early attempts at Web humor canonization would affirm EarthLink's corporate choice (though the company itself would be unsuccessful in its bid to unseat AOL). As part of its tenth anniversary celebration, for example, the technology website *CNET.com* featured a 2005 collection of "Top 10 Web Fads," spanning amusing memes and catchphrases, short videos, and early community-building platforms like *Blogger* and *Friendster*.<sup>73</sup> In response to this listing, Ken Fisher took to the *Ars Technica* blog soon after to express his discontent with the rankings—in particular, asserting a place for "the hallucinogenic *Mushroom! Mushroom!* 'badger animation'," which did not make CNET's list.<sup>74</sup> But Fisher did find a single enthusiastic point of

<sup>73</sup> Molly Wood, "Top 10 Web Fads," *CNET.com*, 21 July 2005. [http://www.cnet.com/4520-11136\\_1-6268155-1.html](http://www.cnet.com/4520-11136_1-6268155-1.html). Accessed via Internet Archive: [https://web.archive.org/web/20050724000327/http://www.cnet.com/4520-11136\\_1-6268155-1.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20050724000327/http://www.cnet.com/4520-11136_1-6268155-1.html) 13 August 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Ken Fisher, "Top 10 Fads Online? Hold On." *ArsTechnica.com*, 21 July 2005, 7:21pm, <https://arstechnica.com/uncategorized/2005/07/5125-2/>. Accessed 13 August 2018.

concurrence with the CNET post's ranking (which, he otherwise declared, "flat-out sucks!") in its number one spot: a website called the Hamster Dance.<sup>75</sup> Hamster Dance, Fisher argues, has earned its "special place in the old school" via its longevity and enduring strangeness: "it stems from before all of the forced attempts at humor, and man, that song is trippy."<sup>76</sup>

In its ranking, the CNET post sums Hamsterdance thus:

Sometimes a fad is so popular it doesn't have to be spelled right. Such is the case with Hamsterdance (sic), created in 1998 by Deidre LaCarte as an homage to her pet hamster, Hampton (and, rumor has it, a traffic-getting contest with a friend). The music? "Whistle Stop" by Roger Miller. The result? A CD-spawning, still-kicking Web fad that transcended geekiness--in fact, many of us at CNET can remember receiving "Have you seen this!!!!?" e-mail from, like, our parents. Wow, dude.<sup>77</sup>

A blog post from an earlier era, near the time of Hamster Dance's origins, described the encounter with Hamster Dance in an evocative narrative entitled "How Hamster Dance Stole My Soul":

It's like this: Several weeks ago I was blithely entering 'strange', 'weird', 'odd' and 'bizarre' into various search engines [...] when a title caught my eye - 'Hamster Dance'. Hmmm, thought I, they misspelled 'hamster'...

It was crude, really. Four endless animated gifs that didn't even match in style. Corny music that didn't loop smoothly - there was an audible scritch as it began again and again and again. And I do mean again and again and again.

First I showed it to my boss[...]Then I showed it to my friend Chaz. He just laughed. But it was an oddly hollow laugh. As if he could sense the evil lurking behind the cute little rodents.

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<sup>75</sup> Again, as with Dancing Baby, throughout this chapter, I refer to this phenomenon as "The Hamster Dance" for purposes of internal consistency, despite the fact that commentators I cite have variously referred to the website as "hamster dance," "hamsterdance," or "Hamsterdance," and occasionally used the "[sic]" marker to indicate the unorthodox spelling of "Hamster" used by creator LaCarte as either an error or in commemoration of her pet Hampton. Further complicating the issue is that both the domains [www.hamsterdance.com](http://www.hamsterdance.com) and [www.hampsterdance.com](http://www.hampsterdance.com) have variously been registered to redirect to the Hamster Dance site. At the time of this dissertation's final writing, both domains redirect to the site's current iteration, which Fisher referred to in the *Ars Technica* piece below as "a travesty of Hamster Dance exploitation."

<sup>76</sup> Fisher, "Top 10 Fads Online? Hold On."

<sup>77</sup> Wood, "Top 10 Web Fads."

I added Hamster Dance to my links page and pretty much forgot about it. Then one day at work I found myself humming that song. But I couldn't get it quite right. Was it doodle-eep-doop-doodah-do-dop or deedel-doop-dop-doodop-dee-dop? With a gnawing (sorry) sense of forboding, I returned to Hamster Dance. I noticed it had links to fishydance and cowedance. They were technically better - fishydance fit mostly all in the window, and cowedance had an impressive array of MIDIs to choose from. But, somehow, they just weren't Hamster Dance.

I returned repeatedly, helplessly fascinated, unable to comprehend the uncanny hold the page exerted on me. Those cheerful little gray hamsters, bouncing up and down in a chorus line. They moved with perfect synchronicity, [sic] up and down, up and down, like the pistons of some furry, chipmunk-cheeked machine. The power-walking-in-place hamsters, their eyes fixedly staring out in mute appeal as they pant and jiggle. The ones that didn't even dance, just twirled in an endless circle, beady eyes shut and stubby arms rapturously raised to the heavens. I've tried spinning in place like that. It's fun, and what's more, it leads to a unique altered state of reality.<sup>78</sup>

Both this account and the CNET blurb suggest the social landscape through which news of—and access to—the Hamster Dance site circulated, as well as some facets of its aesthetics and format, its popularity and corporate aftermath, and the affect it engendered on its viewers and listeners. Hamster Dance was circulated through e-mail forwards, message board posts, and blind searching; its 1998 viral moment still preceded robust search and reliable archiving or hosting structures. Both accounts suggest the centrality of sound to the Hamster Dance phenomenon, both in terms of the original object's catchiness, and in its eventual commercial viability beyond an amateur web page. The blog post suggests further sonic implications: the existence of other (lesser, but still noteworthy) versions of the song and “dance.”

The reward for successfully navigating to the site—in its original version, the URL <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Bluffs/4157/hamsterdance.html> —was a single web page filled

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<sup>78</sup> “How Hamster Dance Stole My Soul,” *angelfire.com*, <http://www.angelfire.com/ga/scantsanity/hamster.html>. Accessed 2 February 2019. It's unclear precisely when this was posted, but the first record available in the Internet Archive is from 13 October 1999—a little over a year after the Hamster Dance site was originally published, and a few months after its explosion to internet prominence.

with rows of animated cartoon hamsters, drawn in simple, pixelated strokes and blocks of black, white, orange and brown. Looping animation of the cartoon rodents achieved the titular “dancing”—spooling through a small number of (low-bandwidth, easily-loadable) .GIF files, the various rows of hamsters on the website seemed to jerkily twirl, squat, and wiggle, some smiling or making other faces. A text banner at the website’s head announced the title in unfussy font: “THE HAMPSTER DANCE.” A smaller sub-header read simply “dance the night away.”

Accompanying the untaxing revolutions of the visual material was an audio loop, a small .WAV file that began playing as soon as the user successfully loaded the Hamster Dance page. This sound file was a version of Roger Miller’s 1973 novelty song “Whistle Stop,” originally written for the Walt Disney animated film musical *Robin Hood*. “Whistle Stop” might have been familiar to some Hamster Dance viewer/listeners from this film context, where it was whistled, hummed, and sung by the film’s narrator-minstrel, the anthropomorphic rooster Alan-a-Dale. In the version looping on the Hamster Dance site, however, the wordless vocables of the tune had been sped up significantly, shifting their pitch higher and altering their timbre to a frenetic nasal chirping—a technique similar to that popularized in Ross Bagdasarian’s Alvin and the Chipmunks novelty record creations. The Hamster Dance track, then, was overloaded with pre-existing animal referents for its listeners, and it played unceasingly from the time that the website loaded until the time that it was shut down or navigated away from.

Many of the website’s components looped, and looped infinitely; the site’s functionality engaged an understood affect of bemused fascination, an aesthetics of annoyance—similar to that repeatedly invoked in discourse around Dancing Baby. And as with that prior viral “dance” animation, there was nonetheless something that viewers found—and remarked upon—as *compelling* in this Dance, something that engendered waves of viral circulation and participation,

amateur and professional tributes (or co-optings). Furthermore, though later efforts of the site's creator would lead to "updating" of the site's low-quality visual and audio material, and to the broad circulation of The Hampster Dance as a "hit" song, there remained a clear affinity for the original, attested to by the continued presence of mirrored versions of the original site, its replication via YouTube videos, etc.<sup>79</sup> In the section that follows, I outline Hampster Dance's origins, and its viral circulation and mutation through layers of circles, rings, and loops of the late-1990s and early-2000s media ecosystem.

The Hampster Dance phenomenon evidences a number of key features enabling musical virality: iconic loops, the capacity for easy "mutation" of the song and website into other imitative versions, and the spread of the phenomenon within and across disparate media platforms. For Hampster Dance, these platforms included the Internet, e-mail, word of mouth (or unavoidable earworm, as the situation depicted in the EarthLink video might suggest), as well as newspaper articles, CDs, and other "physical" or "offline" media. Both the site's relationship to its content and its situation within an Internet architecture of GeoCities sites and Webrings afforded particular ease to the processes of viral mutation and circulation that unfolded towards the Hampster Dance at the turn of the millennium.

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<sup>79</sup> This frequent mirroring was, in part, afforded by the format in which the original content was encoded. All the site's GIFs and music were base64 encoded in the site's source code, rather than hosted externally. This meant that users could download, recreate, and manipulate the original Hampster Dance site (exactly and in its audiovisual entirety) with relative ease—also an important factor in the production of parodies and alternate versions, discussed below.

## Encountering the Hampster Dance

As the *CNET* post notes, the site was created in August 1998 by Deidre LaCarte, a Canadian art student, as part of a friendly competition among friends to see who could create the website that would accrue the most traffic. The site's unorthodox spelling came from the name of LaCarte's real-life pet hamster, Hampton—this would be explained in an “About” page appended to the site after its explosion in visitor count. The site was simple to make and simple to run—just a bit of text, alternating rows of .GIFs (one for each hamster variety), base64 encoded in the site's HTML, and a .WAV file of the sped up “Whistle Stop” (called “dedodedo.wav”), also base64 encoded, set to autoplay and automatically loop.

For the first several months of the site's existence, it received very little traffic. Then, for with no clear catalyst in early 1999, the site began to receive thousands of visitors a week. The pageviews skyrocketed, and web design firm Tilted Media partnered with LaCarte to expand the site and its traffic capacity, and to purchase the domains [www.hamsterdance.com](http://www.hamsterdance.com) and [www.hampsterdance.com](http://www.hampsterdance.com), which then redirected to the original Dance site, with added links to additional explanatory and commercial sites developed by LaCarte, all addressing viewer/listeners from the persona of “Hampton Hamster”

In a page added to the site on May 31, 1999, “Hampton Hamster” posted the following “Hampton Update”:

I think I may be reaching my goal of becoming a Web Star. Since NewYears Eve there have been over two million people come to see THE HAMSTER DANCE here at Geocities and over six million people at Hamsterdance.com. Ok so you're wondering how I came up with that number at hamsterdance.com? There isn't a counter on the page but there is a program that is counting how many people have been there and from what countries they are from. The Hampster Dance known world wide. If you look in the June issue of WINDOWS MAGAZINE, on the back page, they mention my web page. Other magazines that have the page in it are, YAHOO INTERNET LIFE, GIRLS LIFE and PC HOME. The Hamster Dance has been mentioned on ABC NEWS, CNN, TV shows,

Newspapers, Radio Stations and will be on display for 3 years at the LONDON (ENGLAND) SCIENCE MUSEUM. Now that is what I call fame.<sup>80</sup>

The update goes on to explain a variety of site features and respond to various Hamster-Dance-related phenomena, serving as an informal rejoinder to seemingly frequently asked questions. These explanations included information about the file formats used, copyright information, the identity of the sound file used, links to “alternative versions,” and merchandise availability. All of the formats described in LaCarte’s explanations shared a common functionality of looping, of continuously returning to their beginning upon reaching their conclusion. Shared by both the animated .GIF visual files and the .WAV sound file, this endlessly repetitive functionality was, I argue, a deeply constitutive element of the Hamster Dance’s viral musicality.

The Hamster Dance site existed originally as a free site built on GeoCities, a major player in the early American Internet landscape. In 1995, the company began offering individuals 1MB of data hosting, free of charge, to build a personal website, along with an e-mail account. This gave users with basic web-coding fluency the ability to assemble and present content of their choosing, and led to the creation and proliferation of a huge number of individual, relatively unconnected websites. GeoCities financed these free sites by effecting a divide between commercial and personal sites, hosting advertisements from its commercial customers on its personal user pages. The language with which these personal sites were presented and marketed reinforced prevailing 1990s metaphors of the Web: GeoCities amateur website builders were

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<sup>80</sup> Deidre LaCarte, “Update” *Hamsterdance.com*, 31 May 1999, <http://geocities.com:80/Heartland/Bluffs/4157/update.html>. Accessed via Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/19991012210221/http://geocities.com:80/Heartland/Bluffs/4157/update.html> 13 August 2018.

“homesteaders” and could become part of “neighborhoods”<sup>81</sup> (to which they had to “apply for residency”). Personal website builders were “helping build the societies of the New Frontier.”<sup>82</sup> Such framing bolstered popular ideas of the Internet as spatial, geographic, and social, metaphorically connecting it to notions of pioneering, the Wild West, Manifest Destiny, and the celebrated rights of settler colonialism territory-claiming historically available to (white) Americans.<sup>83</sup> Early GeoCities communities centered around common interests (e.g., classical music in the “Vienna” community, outdoor recreation in the “Yosemite” community), age (“Enchanted Forest” for kids or “CollegePark” for college students), or identity (“WestHollywood,” featuring “a culture based on gay and lesbian identity”)—with geographical locations often functioning as metonyms for the shared communal parameters.<sup>84</sup> GeoCities offered a variety of functionalities and templates for its sites, including guestbooks and view-counters, as well as the possibility for inclusion in webring architectures. Many of these features—the last in particular—helped function in the viral spread of the Hampster Dance, as will be discussed below.

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<sup>81</sup> See “Information: So Why Do We Do This?” *GeoCities.com*, 1996. Accessible via Internet Archive at <http://web.archive.org/web/19961221003035/http://www.geocities.com:80/BHI/why.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> This metaphor has been analyzed in its ramifications for understandings of digital property and ownership. See James Boyle, “The Second Enclosure Movement and the Construction of the Public Domain,” *Conference on the Public Domain*, November 2001. <http://www.law.duke.edu/pd/papers/boyle.pdf>; Kathleen Olson, “Cyberspace as Place and the Limits of Metaphor,” *Convergence* 11/1 (2005): 10-18. For a broader discussion of early metaphors of internet usage and community—in particular, the additions of internet as highway, as brain, and as library/archive—see Mark Steфик, ed., *Internet Dreams: Archetypes, Myths, and Metaphors* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>84</sup> “29 Neighborhoods: Neighborhood Directory and Profile,” *GeoCities.com*, 1996. Accessible via Internet Archive at <http://web.archive.org/web/19961220165942/http://www.geocities.com:80/homestead/homedir.html>.



## Dancing .Gifs and Uncanny Whistles: The Audio/Visuals of Hampster Dance

### .GIFs as Cinema, .GIFs as Music

“Can the loop be a new narrative form appropriate for the computer age?” Lev Manovich asks in the prologue to *The Language of New Media*. Manovich forwards the loop as the progenitor of both cinema and computer programming, and describes the mechanism’s centrality to programming as follows:

Programming involves altering the linear flow of data through control structures, such as ‘if/then’ and ‘repeat/while’; the loop is the most elementary of these control structures...As the practice of computer programming illustrates, the loop and the sequential progression do not have to be considered mutually exclusive. A computer program progresses from start to end by executing a series of loops.<sup>85</sup>

Manovich’s claim, that loops might provide a material, formal, or format linkage between programming and cinema, is one that is taken up across a great deal of scholarship on internet aesthetics—in particular around the format of the GIF. However, as I will shortly argue, Manovich’s arguments—about disrupting linear flows and combining progress with repetition—also resonate strongly with *musical* structure, practice, and experience. One might, I argue, find resonances between music and code intersecting with particular strength in the format of the animated GIF.

The GIF (or Graphics Interchange Format) makes up the primary looping visual components of the Hampster Dance. An image format introduced by CompuServe in 1987, the GIF gained traction for its capacities of compression and animation—two desirable faculties infrequently paired in early networked computing. As a format, the GIF had the capacity to store and quickly display in succession a number of highly-compressed image frames, returning to the first after displaying the final image in sequence. From the 1990s onwards, this compact-yet-eye-

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<sup>85</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, xxxiii.

catching format was used copiously across vernacular web production, a hallmark of what Jason Eppink calls the GIF's "enduring ethos of the commons," related to its early lack of patenting and open format.<sup>86</sup> Embedded .GIF files on amateur sites became a staple of the millennial web aesthetic.

Scholarship on this format has largely emerged from film theory and has, not coincidentally, tended to treat the GIF as a cinematic format.<sup>87</sup> In a blog post, film scholar Kelli Marshall compared the animated GIF to early cinema technologies like the zoetrope and the zoopraxiscope, while Lisa Nakamura refers to .GIFs as "minifilms" structured by "cinematic logic"—perhaps even that of the early pornographic "peep shows."<sup>88</sup> There's resonance between this framing of GIFs and how film theorist Anna McCarthy reads the format as "sources of

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<sup>86</sup> See Jason Eppink, "A Brief History of the GIF (So Far)," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13/3 (2014): 298-306; 301.

<sup>87</sup> In this chapter, I discuss the GIF as an affective format, but I largely read the GIFs in this chapter *as* format, as simple animated loops. Alongside a variety of other technological shifts, like greater file-size capacity, ubiquity of accessible programs for audiovisual manipulation, changes in platform usage, etc., the *use* of the format shifted considerably over the decade-plus span that this dissertation covers. By the mid-2010s, users circulated .GIFs (and looping animated clips lumped under that name, regardless of format) in a more linguistic, communicative mode, with looping excerpts from a variety of pop culture texts coming to serve as shorthand for a variety of rejoinders. This "reaction GIF" model, which has been investigated by a number of recent scholars, is quite different than the uses and affects that I seek to suggest in this chapter. See Graig Uhlin, "Playing in the Gif(t) Economy," *Games and Culture* 9/6 (2014): 517-527; Kate Miltner and Tim Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF," *Social Media + Society* (July-September 2017): 1-11; Linda Huber, "Remix Culture & the Reaction GIF," *Gnovis: Journal of Communication, Culture, and Technology* (2015). <http://www.gnovisjournal.org/2015/02/25/remix-culturethe-reaction-gif/>. Accessed 13 December 2018.

Additionally, scholars like Lauren Jackson have suggested the ways in which seemingly "neutral" practices of "reaction GIF"ing resound through legacies of blackface minstrelsy and through contemporary media spectacularizations of racist violence. See Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," *TeenVogue.com*, 2 August 2017. <http://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Kelli Marshall, "Animated GIFs, Cinemagraphs, and Our Return to Early Cinema," *Kellimarshall.net*, 8 June 2011, Captured via Internet Archive at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120802081605/http://www.kellimarshall.net/film/animated-gifs/>. Accessed 12 February 2019; Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Culture on the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2007), 65.

intense visual pleasure,” drawing on a classic film theorization: “GIFs exude what Laura Mulvey (1975) once referred to, in relation to the female body in classical narrative cinema, as *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”<sup>89</sup>

But against this popular framing of .GIFs as film, I suggest that, despite their silence, .GIFs might have a paradoxical to-be-listened-to-ness. They might equally be read as musical, due to the formal and affective qualities of their central functional feature: the loop. This follows from Elizabeth Margulis’s assertion that “music is the canonical domain of repetition, and when we reinterpret another domain to emphasize its repetitiveness, we are, in fact, examining a quasi-musical aspect of that domain.”<sup>90</sup> .GIFs are fundamentally non-narrative, non-teleological, and in those regards are deeply un-cinematic. As suggested in the various snippets of reception discourse around *Hampster Dance*, the site’s various loops engendered a mode of viewer/listenership characterized by lapses in linear temporality; such a reported experience is common across many of the objects in this chapter. While such an experience might be strange in a filmic or cinematic context—and perhaps this is the understood context through which befuddled viewer/listeners were interpreting their experience—it is a common component of a great deal of musical listening. Repetition, stresses Margulis, is “a fundamental characteristic of what we experience as music.”<sup>91</sup>

The ideal experience of a .GIF almost necessarily lasts longer than a single loop, but the pleasure in viewing a .GIF could extend over many repetitions, its exactly repeated movements

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<sup>89</sup> Anna McCarthy, “Visual Pleasure and GIFs,” in *Compact Cinematics: The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media*, 113-122, edited by Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Pulaki (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017); 113,116.

<sup>90</sup> Margulis, *On Repeat*, 4.

<sup>91</sup> Margulis, *On Repeat*, 5.

suggesting pattern, dance, meter. As an iconic format of the early vernacular web, .GIFs were frequently linked to looping sound through their proximity, in simple (even trivial or obnoxious) amateur creations like *Hampster Dance*. But even separate from any accompanying soundtrack, I propose hearing GIFs' obnoxiousness as *ostinato*, a silent yet pervasive musicality comprising the participatory Internet's earliest aesthetic.

### "Whistle Stop" Animates the Uncanny

The site and phenomenon of "*Hampster Dance*" were clearly named for the movement of the .GIF figures, which I read as manifestly musical. But viral musicking practices of remix and reportage around the phenomenon make it clear that the explicitly-musical component—that is, the site's autoplaying, looping .WAV file—constituted a significant part of *Hampster Dance*'s iconicity, its mixed appeal and revulsion. The Earthlink commercial serves as testament to earlier responses from the Dance's users, consumers, and circulators in demonstrating that the sound—autoplaying, high-pitched, tinny/low-quality, eternally looping, with no way to pause or mute within the browser—comprised a major part of the phenomenon.

As mentioned above, the .WAV file that began playing as soon as the user successfully loaded the *Hampster Dance* page was an edited sample pulled from Roger Miller's 1973 novelty song "Whistle Stop." This song, originally written for the Walt Disney animated film musical *Robin Hood*, functioned as introductory, establishing and scene-setting music for the film, introducing viewers to the its narrator-minstrel Alan-a-Dale—a singing, talking rooster. In the movie's introduction, "Whistle Stop" helped to operate an ironic pivot, leading viewers into the novelty of a retelling of the Robin Hood story entirely populated by animated animals. The film's very opening credits unfurl beneath a full orchestral overture of swooping strings, harp

glissandi, cymbal crashes, and brass fanfare, suturing title cards for Walt Disney Productions and Buena Vista Distribution Co. to a classic narrative framing gambit: a shot zooming in on the pages of a storybook, telling the tale of Robin Hood. But, the shot doesn't move to center on a picture of the (human) Robin Hood figure depicted alongside the book's text. Instead, the shot focuses on an image that could have been dismissed by the viewer as marginal: a miniature illustration of a rooster in the page's corner. With the shift to the rooster, the orchestral scoring cadences and begins to fade, as voiceover narration begins: "You know, there's been a heap o' legends and tall tales about Robin Hood... Well, we folks of the animal kingdom have our own version." The speaking voice of this narrator—also performed by Roger Miller—has a distinct twang and elongated, wide vowels, indexing a Southern "country" identity, at odds with the cinematic orchestral opening. This is reinforced in the scoring, as the orchestral strings die away entirely, replaced by the accompanimental strumming of an acoustic guitar—figured visually onscreen as a lute, played by Alan-a-Dale's rooster character in the animation. It is in this context in the film that "Whistle Stop" begins: articulating the transitions from (animated) static book to full animation, from a cast of human to animal characters, and from the epic mode to a more vernacular one. Then, following the opening, "Whistle Stop" functions as a kind of ritornello throughout the movie, indicating the intervention of the narrator into the flow of the story.

As a musical piece within *Robin Hood*, "Whistle Stop" furthers the rustic, folk-y register indexed by the narrator's voice and opening voiceover. A lightly-syncopated walking-pace tune in G major, the main melody consists of four phrases looped over a simple harmonic progression (tonic-dominant-tonic-subdominant-dominant-tonic). Its arpeggio-based melodic structure is simple and familiar, highly reminiscent of Edwin Pearce Christy's 1847 minstrel tune

“Goodnight, Ladies.”<sup>92</sup> The fourth unit of the tune’s four phrases is truncated, fit into a six-pulse bar that ushers in the refrain again with three soft, percussive upbeat pulses: these are performed as taps on the body of the guitar. Across the track, Roger Miller performs the repetitions of the melody with a variety of soundmaking techniques. He first whistles the tune—hence its name—with a breathy, through-the-teeth feel, then vocalizes it through his pursed lips, as though mimicking a trumpet. The third time through the refrain is sung on non-semantic vocalese syllables like “deet-dah-dee,” and Miller concludes the iteration with a chuckle—this is the portion of the song sped up and used in the Hampter Dance. The track concludes with another whistled iteration, and then a loop of the whistle with a lip-“trumpet” countermelody layered on top. On the whole, “Whistle Stop” is redolent of nostalgic, unsophisticated Americana. It serves, within the context of *Robin Hood*, to render a particular framing for a palimpsestic historical legend: that of a naive vernacular, accessible to and adapted for traditional American families, especially their children.

I include this peregrination to illuminate the original context for the song, in part because the song and film may well have been part of the intertextual world of the young American Internet users who helped consume and circulate the Hampter Dance to such early viral success. Though the Disney *Robin Hood* was originally premiered in 1973, the movie was a major part of the creation and promotion of Disney’s home video label efforts in later decades—in part

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<sup>92</sup> If a connection between minstrelsy and hamsters—foreshadowed in the last section and alluded to here—seems like a stretch, it is perhaps worth noting that the pairing of uncanny animated hamsters with (invisible) Blackness re-emerged in a 2010 Kia campaign for the brand’s Soul automobile line, which featured Soul-driving hamsters marked as “hood” or Black by their attire, urban environs, and backing tracks (“This or That” by 1990s Queens hip-hop duo Black Sheep). The ad traded on both an amalgam of viral internet aesthetics—dancing, computer generated bodies, “cute” animals broadly and hamsters in particular—and drew on the capital of Black American cultural production, without the use of Black *human* figures that might have precluded a white audience from seeing themselves as the intended buyers. See “Kia Motors America Breaks New Soul Ad Campaign and Brings Back Hamsters by Popular Demand,” *Marketing Weekly News* (12 June 2010): 216.

because of its perceived status as a revered but “lesser” effort in the Disney canon.<sup>93</sup> *Robin Hood* was the first installment on the Walt Disney Classics label, released on Betamax, Laserdisc, CED, and VHS in 1984, was re-released in 1991, and again in July 1999 on VHS, as part of the Walt Disney Masterpiece Collection.<sup>94</sup>

In the version looping on the Hampster Dance site, however, the wordless vocables of the tune were sped up significantly, shifting their pitch higher and altering their timbre to a frenetic nasal chirping—a technique that had previously been used to infamous effect by Ross Bagdasarian (aka Dave Seville) in his novelty record creations Alvin and the Chipmunks. The Hampster Dance track was, between these various intertexts, quite overloaded with pre-existing animal referents for its listeners, and the distinctive clip played unceasingly from the time that the website loaded until the time that it was shut down or navigated away from.

In the tradition of novelty records, the human voice here was rendered strange through a simple technical alteration. “Normal” human vowels became squeaks and chirps, indexing an exuberant, minuscule being. In his discussion of relations between sound and image in early animation, Scott Curtis suggests the following regarding cartoon voices:

why do cartoon characters always have funny voices? Certainly, it is because they have funny bodies: following the pattern of indexical relationships in live-action film, the voice matches the body. But given that indexicality is impossible in a cartoon, no match between sound and image is required except by analogy, that is, iconically. Iconic relations obtain in cartoons especially with regard to voice and body: the ‘distorted’ voices of cartoon characters are analogous to their ‘distorted’ and ‘elastic’ bodies.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See Andrew Lynch, “Animated Conversations in Nottingham: Disney’s *Robin Hood* (1973),” in *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, edited by Gail Ashton and Daniel T. Kline, 29-42 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>94</sup> See Morrie Gelman, “CLASSIC ‘PINOCCHIO’ NOW A HOME VIDEO,” *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, Jun 21, 1985: 3D.

<sup>95</sup> Scott Curtis, “The Sound of Early Warner Bros. Cartoons,” in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, edited by Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992): 202.

In the case of the dancing ham(p)sters and the badgers below (and, largely, all of the other objects in the chapter), this is certainly the case—both the “bodies” and their understood “voices” are funny. But the example of Hampster Dance in particular features a particularly “inelastic” vocal quality, overwhelmingly characterized by a timbre and production artifact reading deeply mechanical—analogous to the .GIF rodents’ inhabitation of a looping, computerized, uncannily nonhuman digital world. If, as Connor suggests, a voice “conjures for itself a kind of body,” then this conjured body inhabits a strange middle ground, straddling human, animal, and technological.<sup>96</sup>

The track—and its embedded protocol for autoplaying and looping when the page loaded—gave users a way to annoy or embarrass coworkers or friends: setting the site to a default home page would make the sound erupt in semi-public spaces of offices, libraries, computer labs. But the original music of Hampster Dance became highly iconic of the phenomenon as a whole—even though various alternate versions jettisoned it in favor of alternate tracks, or of higher production-value versions.<sup>97</sup>

### **Read All About It: Hybrid Ecology of Hampster Sharing**

Initially, Hampster Dance seemed to have spread via word-of-mouth circulation—both on- and offline, in e-mail, online user groups, message boards, and blogs. Shortly thereafter, media coverage became another significant mode of spreading the site, song, and dance.

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<sup>96</sup> Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 36.

<sup>97</sup> Years later, when the original Hampster Dance site had been altered to the more highly produced version, but prior to the wide availability of copy and mirror sites, especially versions hosted through YouTube, people could still be found on forums and message boards asking for the “ORIGINAL” version. See “The original Hamster Dance?” *Forums.appleinsider.com*, 13 May 2003. <https://forums.appleinsider.com/discussion/24965/the-original-hamster-dance>. Accessed 2 February 2019.



Newspaper and periodical coverage of Hampster Dance very valuably suggests prevailing modes of viewer/listener audience behavior. Their framings situate the site as content for consumption, as well as a cultural and aesthetic problem to be solved (or at least engaged with).

Perhaps because of their proximity to a Web-active demographic, college newspapers were some of the first media outlets to cover the Hampster Dance as a phenomenon—the *Duke University Chronicle* published a short piece in February 1999, while *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran one in early March.<sup>98</sup> In his offering for the *Duke University Chronicle*, Timothy Millington forwarded the Hampster Dance as a successor to the Dancing Baby—a comparison that several other journalists would make as well, alluding to the ubiquity, absurdity, and compact sharability common to both objects.

Other coverage of the Hampster Dance took place in small novelty tech columns of print periodicals; these spaces often functioned curatorially, with reporters listing a collection of websites spanning a variety of topics and functionalities. The columns also functioned, in part, as instructional platforms, endeavoring to teach newspaper readers how to navigate and interact with the internet. Across 1999 and 2000, the curatorial collections of these columns often included the Hampster Dance as a recommended (and increasingly well-known) site for humor and time-wasting, highlighting its capacity for annoyance and bizarre fascination, while tucking it amongst more “serious” Web fare—Timothy Gassen of *The Arizona Daily Star*’s “Star Tech” section blurbbed the Hampster Dance back-to-back with an explanation of the newly-launched Tuscon-Pima Public Library site, while Jack Schofield set dancing hamsters alongside the

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<sup>98</sup> Timothy Millington, “New Tail Shaker on the Internet,” *Duke University Chronicle*, 19 February 1999; Jeffrey R. Young, “A Harvard Student Makes a Gallant Effort to Keep Dancing Hamsters Wholesome,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 March 1999. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Harvard-Student-Makes-a/111703>. Accessed 13 August 2018.

website of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines ([www.landmine.org](http://www.landmine.org)), the GeoCities platform (the “secret of its success is that it gives away free home pages and e-mail addresses”), and new search engine All the Web ([www.alltheweb.com](http://www.alltheweb.com)) in *The Guardian*’s “World Web News in Brief” segment.<sup>99</sup> As part of the curatorial work of these columns, reporters generally described the content of the sites to their readers, providing a summary and—crucially—a spelling-out of each site’s complete URL, so that interested readers could easily navigate to the recommended Web pages.

An article in *The Australian* in February of 1999 suggests the page’s quick and broad global—or at least Anglophone—dissemination; the coverage notes the Dance’s “hillbilly sound track” and “oddly appealing, hypnotic effect,” before warning of the infinite capacity of its loops: “these critters will boogie all day if you can stand it.”<sup>100</sup> An August 1999 feature in the Ft. Lauderdale *Sun Sentinel* began with with a search for meaning: “How could an undistinguished graphic and an irritating lyric grab the attention of Web users throughout the country?”<sup>101</sup> To answer this question, the article turned to Harvard student Thomas Lotze, who’d been embroiled in copyright contestations over his creation and promotion of an exact replica of LaCarte’s original site. Channeling a vague Freudianism, Lotze suggested that “The hamster dance came from the collective unconscious, from the minds and hopes and dreams of everyone. In a very real sense, the hamster dance came from you.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Timothy Gassen, “Dancing Hamsters are Pleasurably Puzzling,” *The Arizona Daily Star*, 1 March 1999, 4E; Jack Schofield, “World Web News in Brief,” *The Guardian*, 13 May 1999, 5.

<sup>100</sup> “A Wallow in the Slough of Despond,” *The Australian*, 23 February 1999: C05.

<sup>101</sup> Lona O’Connor, “Hamsters, You’ve Got Mail!” *Sun Sentinel*, 6 August 1999. [http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1999-08-06/news/9908060038\\_1\\_hamster-dance-web-page-million-hits](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1999-08-06/news/9908060038_1_hamster-dance-web-page-million-hits). Accessed 13 August 2018.

<sup>102</sup> O’Connor, “Hamsters.”

While Lotze's pull quote might have been breezily compelling, the article suggested a few other more concrete factors that underpinned Hampster Dance's successful proliferation. First, a simple and easily accessible template, rendered in the site's HTML—the *Sentinel* article quotes UCLA information studies scholar Phil Agre's simplistic take that "It takes five minutes to copy... You get a complicated and weird effect with a simple mechanism. That's why there are so many of them."<sup>103</sup> Agre's answer alludes to the second factor in Hampster Dance's viral success: mutations. The *Sun Sentinel* article cited "at least 260 copycat sites"—versions of the Hampster Dance site that mimicked the original in its form and content, that acted as further fodder for sharing and consuming, and that directed attention (and clicks) back to the original site.

### **Hampster(?) Dance: Circulation, Iteration, Mutation**

Hampster Dance-as-internet-phenomenon occurred via two mechanisms. On one hand, the sharing of the original site, from one-to-one personal interactions to the one-to-many communications of journalists, gave it visibility, audibility, fame. This sharing replicated the site across eyeballs and Web browsers, affording Internet virality *avant le lettre*. The second component of the phenomenon also included replication, of a less literal sort. Users created a huge number of "versions" of the dance, standalone websites that used Hampster Dance's form and formats while varying its content. As alluded to above, these proliferating Dances were almost always remarked upon in the journalistic coverage of the website, referenced as a constitutive element of its seemingly inexplicable popularity.

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<sup>103</sup> O'Connor, "Hamsters."

A necessary component of virality is iterability—the capacity for a virus to be repeated, but mutably, in new forms and formats, across varying media and platforms. In all the examples of viral internet phenomena that I discuss in this chapter--and throughout this dissertation--the necessary characteristic of iterability remains constant. Modulations and mutations of a viral object keep that object in circulation, spurring new creation and consumption in continuing cycles. (“Sure, you’ve seen [x]—but have you seen the [y] version of [x]?”)

The accessible code and format of Deidre LaCarte’s *Hamster Dance* made it particularly well-suited to iterability. The original page’s source code was simple and easily accessible to savvy internet users, comprising only a few distinct elements. The page consisted of alternating rows of four different .GIF files, each depicting an animated hamster of a different size, animation style, and “dance move.” The rows of dancing hamsters—the primary content of the page’s space—were flanked by a few bands of cheeky, somewhat nonsensical text, and a .wav file of the sped-up “Whistle Stop” began to play automatically, looping ad infinitum, once the page loaded. All of these components—including the .GIF and .WAV files themselves—were laid out in base64 encryption in the page’s HTML, rather than being hosted remotely by LaCarte or an external corporate hosting service. This meant that a user with a rudimentary working knowledge of HTML and command lines could relatively easily replicate the *Hamster Dance* site in its entirety, simply by copying and pasting the code in *its* entirety. Modifications were similarly simple; a user could easily alter or replace the component parts of the page with their own materials or content—substituting out hamsters for other .GIFs, or replacing “Whistle Stop” with an alternate sound file of their choosing.

And this is precisely what happened, in the wake of the *Hamster Dance*’s emergence to digital popularity and Internet traffic in late 1998. Some Internet users made exact copies of the

page—whether to siphon off attention and page views for themselves, or to preserve and celebrate their own version of the page is unclear. Harvard student Thomas Lotze, mentioned in the previous section on journalistic coverage, was one such enterprising copier; Lotze’s site garnered 10,000 visitors in just two weeks. In the *Chronicle* article cited above, Lotze’s efforts are framed as a moral crusade, in which he “rescued” the original site’s content from a context of advertising that included “unsavory” links to online pornography. His quasi-philosophical quote regarding the content’s origins—“The hamster dance came from the collective unconscious, from the minds and hopes and dreams of everyone. In a very real sense, the hamster dance came from you”—might be read as a somewhat disingenuous attempt to direct attention away from the real and singular creator of the site’s content and arrangement, LaCarte.<sup>104</sup>

Apart from simple replications, other users—hundreds of others—iterated the site with mutations, lifting and manipulating the source code to alter the site’s content and theme. Riffing on Kurt Mosser’s definition of “cover” versions, these imitating Dances could be said to exist in a Wittgensteinian “family relationship” to the original, sharing some number of formal features that clearly indexed the original—and thereby necessitating familiarity with the original for their meaning-making.<sup>105</sup> Versions of Hampster Dance usually included several rows of .GIFs, varied tokens of some type or other. The pages usually bore a header labeling the Dance with its specific variant, and often included a subheading referencing the “dance the night away” of the

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<sup>104</sup> Young, “A Harvard Student Makes a Gallant Effort to Keep Dancing Hamsters Wholesome.” The *Chronicle* piece mentions LaCarte dismissively in its penultimate paragraph, returning sympathetically to Lotze’s eventual forced takedown of the Dance, and redirecting his Harvard page to LaCarte’s original. In part because of the early publication date of the *Chronicle* piece, and in part because of the aptness of Lotze’s soundbite, his quotation theorizing the metaphysics of the Hampster Dance received a great deal of repetition across media reportage.

<sup>105</sup> Kurt Mosser, “‘Cover Songs’: Ambiguity, Multivalence, Polysemy,” *Popular Musicology Online* 2 (2008), <http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/02/mosser.html>. Accessed 2 May 2017.

original. Hampster Dance imitation sites also usually included a looped musical clip that would begin automatically playing upon navigation to the page. Sometimes this was the same hyperspeed “Whistle Stop” clip featured on the original Hampster Dance page; other versions used clips that referenced that original, or their particular website’s featured theme, in various ways.

A widely-circulated page called “The Satanic Hampster Dance” was a clear, close parody to the original—but with “demonic” alterations to the audiovisual parameters.<sup>106</sup> [Figure 5] Slightly-altered versions of the original hamster GIFs featured red eyes and fangs, pentagrams, horns, and dripping blood. The site’s background was black, rather than white, and rather than “Dance,” the page’s header read “Sacrifice the night away.” A version of the sped-up “Whistle Stop” track played in a loop for anyone loading the page—but it played *backwards*, starting with an inversion of the clip’s high-pitched chuckle. (Quasi-blasphemous) spiritual themes were clearly popular among remixers; a page called “The Jesus Dance” displayed lines of dancing Christianity-themed GIFs—a swaying crucified Jesus, trumpeting angels, and a pair of dancing Jesuses swinging into and out of each other’s arms—and looped a clip of the 1957 song “Plastic Jesus.”<sup>107</sup> [Figure 6] Other popular versions spanned “The Mohammed Dance,” (set to “Whistle Stop”), “The Fishy Dance,” (set to a sped-up clip from the novelty track “Fish Heads”), “The

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<sup>106</sup> Doug Harroun, “The Satanic Hampster Dance v2.1,” <http://www.greymatter.org/satanichamsterdance/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>107</sup> Ryland Sanders, “The Jesus Dance,” Captured via Internet Archive 7 June 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040607133316/http://www.jesUSDance.org/>. Accessed 2 February 2019. By 2017, it seems that the domain of this site had been bought by a Christian person or entity; at this point the site began being redirected to <http://www.jesuschrist.net/>, a seemingly low-budget but earnest site promoting Jesus Christ and Christianity.

Hooker Dance,” (set to a clip from fad dance hit “The Macarena”) and the timely “Bush-Gore Dance” (set to Devo’s “Whip It”).<sup>108</sup>



Figure 5: Examples of “Satanic Hamster Dance” .GIF stills, featuring red eyes, blood-dripping fangs, and pentagrams

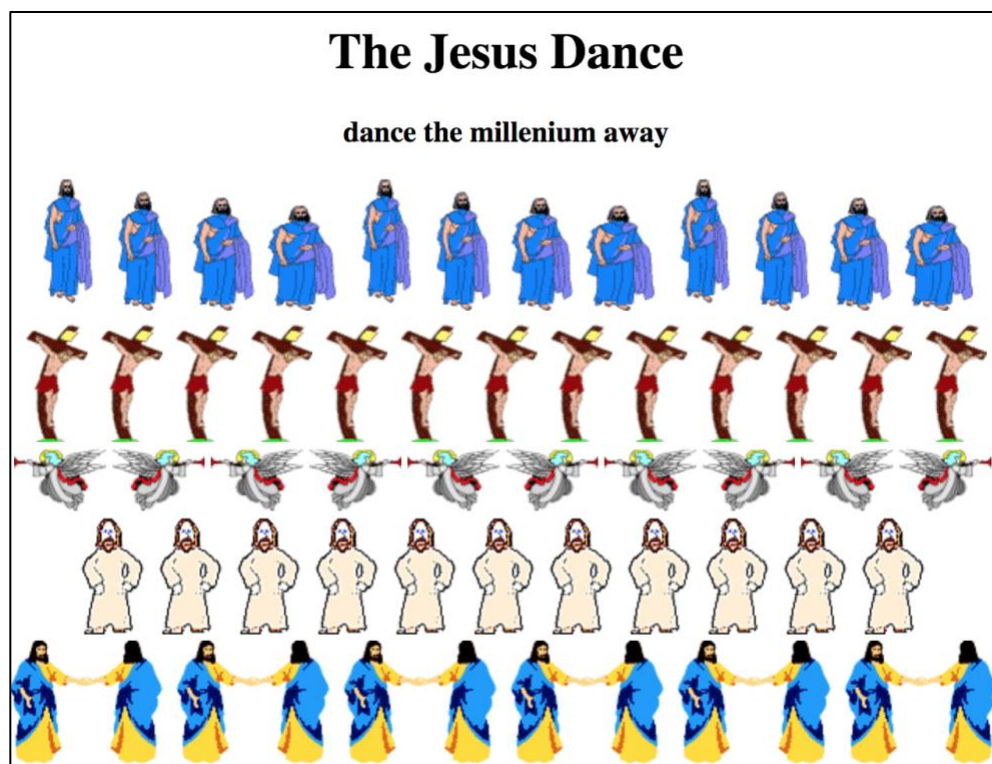


Figure 6: Still from *The Jesus Dance* site, June 2004

<sup>108</sup> See “The Mohammed Dance,” *Mohammeddance.com*, Captured via Internet Archive 26 March 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060326203043/http://www.mohammeddance.com/>. Accessed 2 February 2019; “The Fishy Dance,” *Fishydance.com*, Captured via Internet Archive 11 October 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991011205829/http://www.fishydance.com/>. Accessed 2 February 2019; “The Hooker Dance,” *Markside.com*, Captured via Internet Archive 10 May 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000622090936/http://www.markside.com/hookerdance.shtml>, Accessed 2 February 2019. “The Bush-Gore Dance,” *TVDance.com*, <https://www.tvdance.com/bush-gore/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

While the process of altering and iterating described above necessitated a small amount of programming knowledge, further accretions to the Hampter Dance phenomenon included the development of “builder” websites that wrapped the Hampter Dance site coding process into an even more accessible interface, allowing users with a more rudimentary knowledge of computing, programming, and code to make their own versions of Hampter Dance copycat sites, simply by uploading GIFs and inputting text of their choosing. Hampter Dance was rendered fully modular. As theorists like Lawrence Lessig and Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green have observed, this process of remixing and sharing both emerges from—and is engendering of—creative community.<sup>109</sup> And Jenkins, Ford, and Green stress that “even those who are ‘just’ reading, listening or watching do so differently in a world where they recognize their potential to contribute to broader conversations about that content.”<sup>110</sup> Both remixers and non-remixer viewer/listeners traversed circuitous participatory loops, from the sharing of the original, to the production and sharing of alternate versions. These dynamic, newly-fashioned circuits flowed from the original to copycats and back, sometimes including newspaper or other media reporting.<sup>111</sup> The circuits of reporting, in turn, enfolded and directed flows of attention back to selected highly-visible iterations, as well as inevitably to the original site, effecting what Thorburn and Jenkins refer to as the “complex synergies that always prevail among media

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<sup>109</sup> See Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2008): 68-81; Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 113-194.

<sup>110</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 154-155.

<sup>111</sup> Lawrence Lessig refers to similar processes in his work on remix, but construes this process as operating in “layers,” whereas I find it more productive to conceive of this as a set of circuits, iterations, cycles, or loops—in that legacy media reportage and entertainment cooption does not only serve as an external endpoint, but functions to redirect attention and, potentially, creative energy back to the original phenomenon itself. See Lessig, *Remix*, 57-67.



systems, particularly during periods shaped by the birth of a new medium of expression.”<sup>112</sup>

These circuits constituted necessary components of virality: flows of attention—clicks, views, visits, recommendations, and subscriptions—*from* and back *to* a single central object, looping through and being harnessed by a span of other media.

Pragmatically, while the proliferating versions were frequently cited in the press coverage of Hampster Dance, the lack of comprehensive search or aggregating Web platforms posed similar issues of discovery and visibility for these imitator sites. Links to particular versions were included in some of the journalistic reportage of the phenomenon (the Jesus Dance was particularly popular in this context). For more savvy internet users, there were other ways to keep track of Hampster Dances. In a layer above the many loops of the Hampster Dance site itself, an emerging internet architecture offered an isomorphic approach to cycling through the Dance’s many proliferating iterations: the Webring.

### **Ringling Around the Hampsters: Webrings And Dreams Of Looping Community**

In the late 1990s, webrings were framed in technology journalism as a particular architectural solution to the problem of online search. Search engine technology had not yet reached the sophistication of the era monopolized by Google in the late 2000s and 2010s, and sites like Wikipedia, or various other platforms, had not yet emerged as central authoritative aggregates of information or content. Instead, search engines like Yahoo!, Alta Vista, and Excite returned seemingly infinite and indiscriminate results to user queries. Webrings, in contrast, were understood as sites of collective, non-hierarchical authority, offering vetted, curated knowledge

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<sup>112</sup> Thorburn and Jenkins, *Rethinking Media Change*, 3.

around a shared interest or common theme. A 1998 *Newsday* article on webrings suggested the following illustrative scenario:

Enter the word “dinosaur” in the Alta Vista search engine and you’ll get thousands of matches, including Barney and a teenager’s opinion of U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond. But the Paleo Ring (<http://www.pitt.edu/mattf/PaleoRing.html>) consists of 133 Web sites that all feature information about real dinosaurs.<sup>113</sup>

In a similar contrast to the perils of late-1990s Web search, a gushing post in technology magazine *Searcher* suggested:

What if you could do a subject search on the World Wide Web, and then, when you found a site that matches your subject exactly, go on from there to other sites with similar content, one after the other, without ever having to return to the search page. You would be in search heaven, with all relevant content, all the time.<sup>114</sup>

Webrings were an online architecture in which individual webpages were hyperlinked together into a “ring”; on each page, the page creator would include the link to both the previous and next pages in the ring. A user could then navigate through the ring by going to any page in the ring and clicking through the links in a single direction, eventually arriving back at their starting point.<sup>115</sup>

The ring format began with EUROPa (short for Expanding Unidirectional Ring of Pages) a hyperlinked circular network of pages created by Denis Howe in 1994. The EUROPa ring

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<sup>113</sup> David Hakala, “Moving in the Best Circles / Webrings Offer a Alternative to Search Engines, Delivering Manageable Doses of Quality Information,” *Newsday*, Feb 18, 1998, Combined editions: C03. <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/279073177?accountid=10226>.

<sup>114</sup> Irene McDermott, “Running Rings Around the Web,” *Searcher*, April 1999: 67. <http://bi.galegroup.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/essentials/article/GALE%7CA54378552?u=columbiau>. Accessed 12 January 2019.

<sup>115</sup> For a detailed user-focused guide to webring architecture, see Carol Casey, “Creating and Managing Webrings: A Step-by-Step Guide,” *Information Technology and Libraries* 18/4 (12, 1999): 214-224. <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/215831119?accountid=10226>. Accessed 29 December 2018.

system was highly fragile, with each page hyperlinked directly to those preceding and following it.<sup>116</sup> If a page went offline, the links on either side of it would go dead, effectively breaking the circle and potentially stranding the pages on both sides. In 1994, then-teenager Sage Weil developed WebRing, which built on the EUROPa model to incorporate a central database, so that individual users weren't responsible for manually monitoring and updating individual ring hyperlinks on their pages. The resulting more stable structure made Weil's WebRing an alluring commodity; Weil sold it to an Oregon tech company called Starseed in 1996, Starseed was purchased by GeoCities in 1998, and GeoCities was purchased by Yahoo! in 1999.

And yet this compelling software product was frequently discursively framed with a valence of utopian, non-corporate sociality. In an article for *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine*, Greg Elmer optimistically suggests that the webring structure might "provide an alternative to the monopolistic and hierarchical nature of search engines."<sup>117</sup> For outside users, the webring architecture provided a promise of relevance and manageability, via gatekeepers and moderators. For "ringleaders" and other ring page owners, the ring afforded both visibility to an outside user base and community within. This included communities oriented around music; in 1996 there were a dozen music-related WebRings.<sup>118</sup> These included:

"Alanis Ring" (for Alanis Morissette)  
"The Baroque Ring" (for "educational as well as entertaining pages" dealing with baroque music, art, history, and literature)

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<sup>116</sup> Additionally, EUROPa was already defunct and essentially unavailable by the time of the press interest in WebRing. See Irene McDermott, "Running Rings Around the Web," *Searcher*, April 1999: 67. <http://bi.galegroup.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/essentials/article/GALE%7CA54378552?u=columbiau>. Accessed 12 January 2019.

<sup>117</sup> Greg Elmer, "Web Rings as Computer-Mediated Communication," *Computer-mediated Communication Magazine*, January 1999. <https://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1999/jan/elmer.html>. Accessed 2 January 2019.

<sup>118</sup> Sage Weil, "Ring Index: Music," *Webring.org*. Captured 19 October 1996, [https://web.archive.org/web/19961019065241/http://www.webring.org:80/rings\\_music.html](https://web.archive.org/web/19961019065241/http://www.webring.org:80/rings_music.html). Accessed via Internet Archive 12 January 2019.

“Composer’s Cogitation Ring” (for midi composers)  
“Def Leppard Ring of Fire”  
“Foo Fighters Ring”  
“BritPop Ring”  
“Lyrics Ring” (for sites with lots of song lyrics or lyric download files)  
“Midi Ring” (for “fantastic Midi music and outstanding graphic design”) “MusicRing”  
(for musicians and bands)  
“The Cheesy Primus Ring”  
“The Punk and Ska Ring”  
and “Ring Oasis!”

The rings ranged in size from 36 member sites (“Music Ring”) to 5 sites (“Foo Fighters Ring”) and suggested the interests of web-engaged musical communities: bands and performers, particularly from rock and rock-adjacent genres, as well as composition with digital tools.

Less than six months later, the WebRings music ring index would feature dozens more rings, and a much higher average number of pages-per-ring.<sup>119</sup> Added rings included numerous ones for Metallica and metal, a few for Mariah Carey, a few dedicated to Christian rock, and one ring for tuba enthusiasts. Topping out at 305 ringed sites was “IndieRing,” “A ring for independent artists, musicians, bands, zines, writers, poets, etc...” Notably absent from this array were rings for performers or genres of music like hip hop, country, R&B, Latin, or “world” music of any variety; the music rings suggested an overall looping listenership marked as heteronormative, young, white, and male.

The webring architecture served as an ideal structure for the collection, curation, and consumption of proto-viral musickings like Hampster Dance versions. The durable, connected loop provided creators and adaptors the ability to showcase their creations and legibly link them—not only formally but digitally—to the original. A Hampster Dance-specific webring (the

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<sup>119</sup> Sage Weil, “Ring Index: Music,” *Webring.org*. Captured 29 March 1997. [https://web.archive.org/web/19970329172922/http://www.webring.org:80/rings\\_music.html](https://web.archive.org/web/19970329172922/http://www.webring.org:80/rings_music.html). Accessed via Internet Archive 12 January 2019.

“Dancing Pages” ring) boasted over 560 sites in its orbit by February of 2000, with links on the ring’s main site to the original Hampster Dance HTML, and to links where users could create sites of their own.<sup>120</sup> The moderators of the “Dancing Pages” ring held regular contests to select and elevate particular iterations, and promoted a different collection of fifty pages each month—ranging from homages to popular television shows, to all manner of gyrating animals, to animations of the inanimate (trains, bananas, disco balls).

Webrings accomplished both visibility and community through the connective structure of the loop—through its circularity and fundamental unbounded boundedness. A user could continue clicking forever, while cycling through a limited set of content, a constructed (though, perhaps somewhat arbitrary) set of unhierarchical relations. And much as with Hampster Dance and other looping media, the webring came with the reassurance that any material that had been passed up, overlooked, missed out on, will be accessible when it “comes around again” in the structure. Like the loops of the Hampster Dance’s rows of GIF critters, or its uncanny, unending “Whistle Stop” track, the loops of webrings enabled mutating alternating versions of the Dance to spin on in (imagined, paradoxically ephemeral) digital perpetuity.

And just as humorous bits looped on in the “content” or “body” of Hampster Dance or other pages, similar file formats looped at their borders or margins—the advertisements used to fund the amateur users’ sites (either directing money to the users themselves or to hosting platforms like GeoCities, in exchange for the users’ free web real estate) also utilized the sticky,

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<sup>120</sup> Melissa M. Ping, “Welcome to the Animated Dancing Pages Web Ring,” *members.aol.com/pinkbreez*, Captured 29 February 2000. <https://web.archive.org/web/20000229163924/http://members.aol.com:80/pinkbreez/index.html>. Accessed 2 February 2019. See also

musical format of .GIFs.<sup>121</sup> A twenty-first-century adaptation of Raymond Williams's televisual flow, or an extension of Fink's claims regarding the congruities between American minimalist music and American advertising strategy in the middle of the twentieth century, the shared bright colors and grainy (noisy) low-resolution graphics sutured together advertisement and content in an emerging confluence of aesthetics, form, and format.<sup>122</sup>

### **Short Loop About Badgers**

**(goes out of sync after a while sorry)**

The dancing loops of *Hampster Dance* and *Dancing Baby* were characterized in part by their remixes—amateur users participated in the viral musicking of those objects by reconfiguring their looping images and sound files. Debuting a few years after these examples, the “Badgers” animation—the object with which this chapter began—is both more explicitly musical and more professionally produced than this chapter's other artifacts. “Badgers” serves as a prism through which to observe a variety of alternative, coextant mechanisms to those chronicled above, including the presence and participation of professional audiovisual creators in the circuits of early viral musicking; the application of the looping, animated audiovisual aesthetic, outside of a data-constrained or purely amateur setting; and the rise of professionalized aggregate sites for hosting audiovisual humor content in the early 2000s.

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<sup>121</sup> See Lee Dannacher, “Quenching the New Millennium's Thirst for Animated Fare,” *Animation World Network*, Published 1 January 2000. <https://www.awn.com/animationworld/quenching-new-millenniums-thirst-animated-fare>

<sup>122</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, edited by Ederyn Williams (London: Routledge, 1974/2003).

Housed in a relatively unassuming entry on the Weebls-Stuff “Toons” page, “Badgers” originated infinite. Navigate to the site and the animation would play endlessly, looping relentlessly through a searing green landscape of jouncing badgers, bright mushrooms, and a diffident snake. [Figure 7] The names of these three forest-dwelling organisms (the only “lyrics” of the video) formed a catchy rhythmic cycle: eleven quick trochee “badger”s followed by two iterations of “mushroom” at half speed. Badgers popping onto the screen, one at a time, on successive first-syllable hits of each “badger” repetition, followed by a mushroom pictured in animated closeup “jump cuts.” Then, on the fourth time through, a breach—an explosion of red, a shocking shift to a yellow palate, with a swoop upwards of the vocal line to “A snake! A snake!” [Figure 8] The snake gets a full four bars of animated and musical attention (“Oooh it’s a snake/Oooh it’s a snake”) before the loop closes and the badgers begin to bounce up again.



*Figure 7: Stills from “Badgers” animation—the titular badgers and a mushroom*

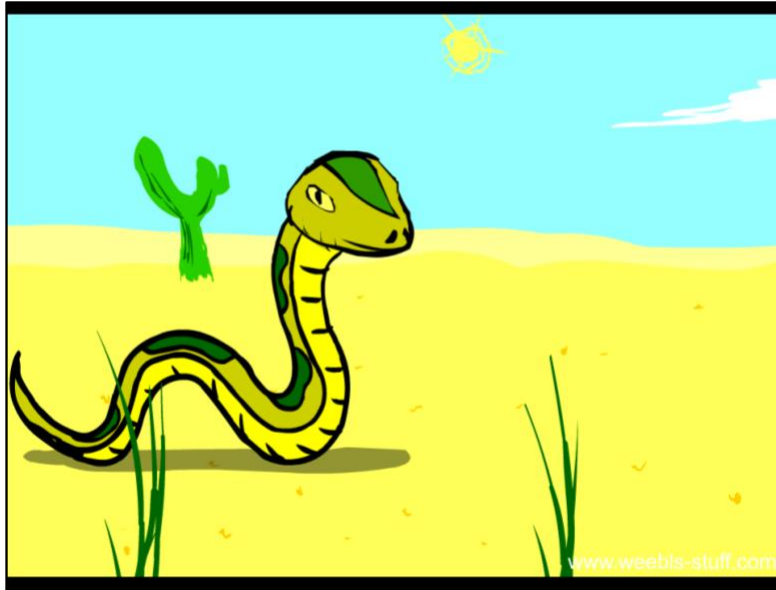


Figure 8: Still from “Badgers” animation—a snake

Everything in the animation is rendered in bright primary colors, heavily outlined in black; the resulting visual effect rests somewhere between a coloring book and stained glass. The musical track corresponds to this simplicity, and likely does a great deal to lend the animation its absurdist character. The predominant musical force is a deep male voice chanting on a single pitch (B), occasionally humorously leaping an octave, with monophonic accompaniment in a sproingy electronic timbre. The voice has a hooded timbre, with deeply exaggerated round vowels—“badger” becomes “bah-dgoh,” “mushroom” is “mah-shroom,” and “snake” is “snehk.” Such vocal production might be more typically found in the performance of the British choral repertoire, than the (almost literally one-note) musical accompaniment to a nonsensical looping cartoon; its presence in this context is deliberately ridiculous. Fittingly, the only moment of musical contrast occurs at the entrance of the snake; the pitch leaps a fifth to F before the strained, hooting vocal line wends its way, sprechstimme-ing downwards, to begin the cycle over again. “Badgers” is childish, cartoon-like, its images filled with unthreatening, non-anthropomorphized non-human actors, but the rhythms of its obvious-yet-nonsensically-



collected words become locked in one's head, in a twitch of shoulders, a tap of toes or fingers. Hours or days after watching, one might have found oneself whispering: “a-badger badger badger badger badger badger badger badger badger mushROOM mushROOM.”

Animator Jonathan “Jonti” Picking (alias Weebl) created the looping animation in 2003 and published it to his personal site, [www.weebles-stuff.com](http://www.weebles-stuff.com).<sup>123</sup> From before the posting of *Badgers*, and well after its viral reception and circulation, Picking used the site to host his own work, drawing all viral attention to himself in a professional capacity. This choice linked his professional efforts with an audiovisual modality associated both with low-quality amateur production, and with the cutting edge of web audienceship and Internet participatory culture. But distinguishing Picking's material from other circulating audiovisual humor files was the manner in which those files could be accessed—hosted remotely by Picking, they could only be viewed through his site, not easily downloaded or remotely shared outside of it.

This meant that participants in *Badgers* had to navigate to Picking's site in particular, in order to view the loop. It meant that there was no opportunity for the animation's theft or for opportunistic republishing of it by other Internet users, but it also limited the viral musicking practices of mutative remix that had been so fundamental to the contagious success of *Dancing Baby* and *Hampster Dance*. The only tenable musicking took the form of audienceship, of viewing and listening to the loop, and of showing that particular loop to others. The only possible remixing and remediation occurred in transplatform contexts—the *Badger* song as iconography on t-shirts and coffee mugs, or purely-sonified in CD form (all available in a “store” on Picking's

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<sup>123</sup> Jonti Picking, “Toons>>Badgers,” *Weebles-Stuff.com*, 2 September 2003. <https://web.archive.org/web/20030927174306/http://www.weebles-stuff.com/toons/21/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

site), or discussed in blogging and journalistic discourse.<sup>124</sup> There were no rings of amateur Badger song transformations, no genre-crossing versions or multi-species mashups.

The centrality of Picking's site as a single hub for the publication and consumption of a variety of audiovisual content was part of a growing trend in the early 2000s. Sites which had originated as the well-curated personal sites of early "webloggers" accrued enough attention and Internet capital to garner corporate sponsorship and content hosting—which in turn allowed them to house a larger amount of audiovisual material, drawing in even greater audiences and further concentrating attention and traffic. In addition to Weebls-Stuff, sites following this trajectory included Tom Fulp's *Newgrounds*, which received corporate hosting in 1999, and whose hosting of the 2004 viral video "Numa Numa Dance" (a performance of Romanian dance pop group O-Zone's "Dragostea Din Tei" by video blogger Gary Brolsma) brought the site particular renown.<sup>125</sup> Another early example was the eBaum's World site ([eBaumsWorld.com](http://eBaumsWorld.com)), originally created and owned by Eric Bauman, and later acquired by HandHeld Entertainment, then by Internet humor and content behemoth Literally Media (owner of the Cheezburger Internet properties).<sup>126</sup> The rise to prominence of these aggregating sites signaled a new ecosystem for

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<sup>124</sup> See, for example, "web and chums," *Cafeshops.com*, Captured via Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20031008165145/http://www.cafeshops.com/weeblbadger,weeblbadger2.7482753>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>125</sup> See Tom Fulp, "Newgrounds Wiki: History," *Newgrounds.com*, [https://www.newgrounds.com/wiki/about-newgrounds/history#wiki\\_toc\\_11](https://www.newgrounds.com/wiki/about-newgrounds/history#wiki_toc_11). Accessed 10 February 2019.

<sup>126</sup> See "HandHeld Entertainment to Acquire eBaum's World, a Premier Online Entertainment Site," *ZVUE.com*, 2 August 2007. Captured via Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071230193748/http://corporate.zvue.com/news/20070802.php>. Accessed 1 February 2019. By this point, processes of "aggregation" of user-generated content in such sites often involved publication of material originally posted on other sites; notoriously, eBaum's World and YTMND engaged in rivalries over content ownership and attribution that involved both discursive exchanges and offensives at the level of code. See "eBaum's World," *Wiki.ytmnd.com*, [http://wiki.ytmnd.com/EBaum%27s\\_World](http://wiki.ytmnd.com/EBaum%27s_World). Accessed 2 February 2019. The opening salvo of this wiki page characterizes eBaum's World as "an entertainment website featuring stolen videos, flash games, animations, and still images, from other websites." The wiki page responds in part to events covered from the eBaum's World perspective in a post titled "Regarding the Recent Attacks on eBaum's World," which describes, among other things, a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack on the site, understood to be in retaliation for

circulating and participating in audiovisual phenomena online. With dramatic increases in content-hosting capacity, such platforms largely obviated the need for architectures such as rings, centralizing and corporatizing curatorial functions that had formerly been entirely the province of weblogging and forum-posting amateurs.

The audiovisual content underwent shifts as well; five years after originally publishing “Badgers,” Picking uploaded a version of the animation as a YouTube video.<sup>127</sup> At a little over one minute long, the video spanned two full repetitions of the full “Badgers” loop. Other subsequent versions of the video would attempt to more fully mimic the original’s looping capacity—in one-hour and ten-hour versions, for example. But the move to YouTube fundamentally altered the medial qualities of the original; in its first posting on Weebls-Stuff, the animation’s title “Badgers” was subtitled with the description: “short loop about badgers (goes out of sync after a while sorry).” The original loops of “Badgers”—the audio and video components—would repeat infinitely in an infinite, untiring digital cosmology. But because of a mismatch between fallible human temporality and machinic obstinacy, the inexactness of human calculation and the dogged precision of the loop directive, the two tracks would ultimately fall

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misappropriated content. See “Regarding the Recent Attacks on eBaum’s World,” *eBaumsWorld.com*, 10 January 2006, Captured via Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060216031232/http://www.ebaumsworld.com/response-01-10-06.html>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>127</sup> See @Weebl’s Stuff, “Badgers: animated music video: MrWeebl,” 28 June 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIyixC9NsLI>. Accessed 10 February 2019.

In her 2013 book *Unruly Media*, Carol Vernallis opens a discussion of YouTube aesthetics by forwarding what she calls “The Badger Song” as “one of the best YouTube exemplars.” See Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). While “Badgers” does fit some of the aesthetic parameters that Vernallis subsequently theorizes (such as “pulse and reiteration”), I believe that it is crucial to acknowledge and analyze the fundamental media differences between a looping animation and a YouTube video. In *Unruly Media*, Vernallis does couch her characterization of “The Badger Song” by noting that “it has an unusual past and a forward-looking future.” Whether that is meant to reference the origins of her YouTube exemplar as a looping flash video is unclear.

out of sync with each other, the visuals lagging infinitesimally each time. Only after minutes (or even hours) of viewership—in dogged, exhaustible human time—would the phasing be perceptible. Only through hypnotization, soporification, ensorcelling, when a viewer/listener has watched and listened to the video for dozens or hundreds of repetitions on end is this slippage between human and digital temporalities made manifest. The inexplicable mode of engagement with such an object is here, both banal and revelatory. Left long enough, the untiring agents of code, software, and hardware would inevitably bring the two components back into alignment again.

### **YTMND: Musicalizing the Absurd**

A final example of musical looping pivots into issues that will fuel the following chapter. The website *ytmd.com* frequently made its way into lists and compilations of notable early-2000s internet humor. The site served as archive for an array of digital audiovisual loops made by a wide array of creators, but all sharing a distinct form: each page on the site featured a single image or animated .GIF, usually iterated in a repeating grid over the full visual expanse of the webpage, as well as an automatically playing music or sound file on a short loop.

The site's notoriety came, in part, from the humor and strangeness of its videos, including a shared (and by now, familiar) aesthetic of low-quality, low-bandwidth formats. Indeed, in a post on the site's info page for prospective creators, aptly titled "Guide to making sites that don't suck," the following caution was posed in terms of choosing and uploading a sound file:

If the sound file is too large, people will just close the page before it loads, making the site pretty much useless. Also, it wastes Max's bandwidth and makes him hate you. The exception to the rule is if you plan to release a full remix of a fad song, and even so, you should use a low quality file and offer a HQ download at another site. So before you

think it's a great idea to upload the entire song of "Livin La Vida Loca", please remember that it's stupid on many levels.<sup>128</sup>

Additionally, the site urged, "Looping is very important and not that hard to do."

The collection of letters in the site's URL—ytmnd—was not just a random jumble. Instead, YTMND served as an acronym pulled from the sound file of the site's initiating page: an image of the actor Sean Connery, with a sound file of Connery saying "You're the man now, dog!"—pulled from the 2000 movie *Finding Forrester* and looped *ad infinitum*. [Figure 9]

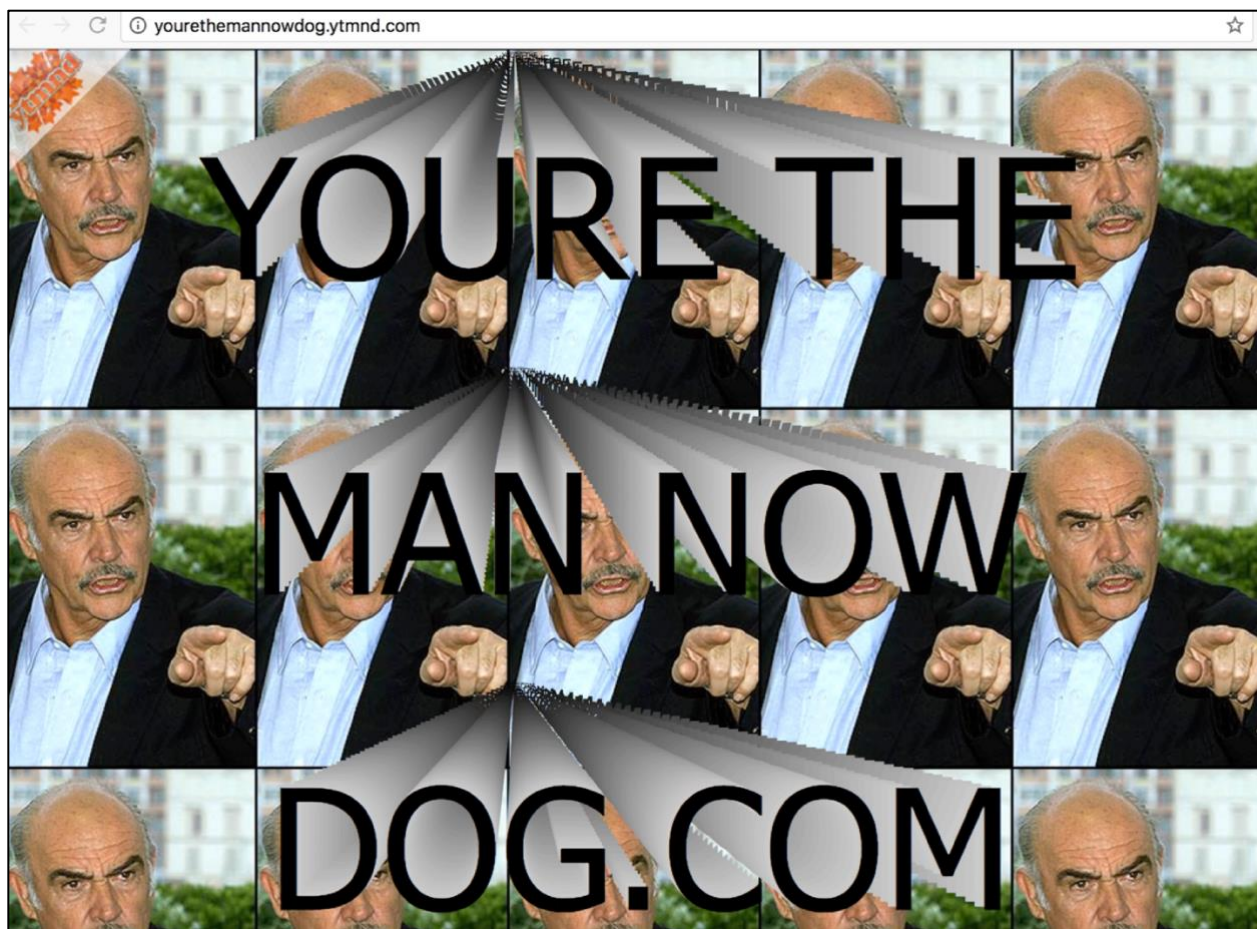


Figure 9: Initiating page of ytmnd.com

<sup>128</sup> "YTMND: Guide to making sites that don't suck," *ytmnd.com*, 4 January 2009. [http://wiki.ytmnd.com/YTMND:Guide\\_to\\_making\\_sites\\_that\\_don%27t\\_suck](http://wiki.ytmnd.com/YTMND:Guide_to_making_sites_that_don%27t_suck). Accessed 18 January 2019.

This amusing nonsense phrase, with its colloquial conflation of species, and its ambiguous affective valence (was Connery offering validation? sarcasm?) epitomized the site's bizarre aesthetic. Other famous and widely circulated *ytmd.com* pages included one with a repeated image of the character Jean Luc Picard from the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* television series, with an electronic dance track overlaid onto a loop of Picard introducing himself: "Captain Jean Luc Picard of the U.S.S. Enterprise."<sup>129</sup> Another was a still image of *Star Wars*'s Darth Vader, with a looping track of Vader's yelling "Nooo!," pulled from a much-reviled moment of the 2005 movie *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*.<sup>130</sup> This page on the site, originally posted in 2005, engendered a number of its own mutations, including "Vadercoaster,"<sup>131</sup> featuring a mosaic of manipulated GIFs of Darth Vader riding a rollercoaster, his yell pitch-shifted to match the coaster height, and a variety of versions of Vader reacting to winter, yelling "Snoow!" rather than "Noo!"<sup>132</sup>

YTMND sites shared with Hampster Dance their ease of repetitive creation and iterability. The collected pages coalesced around a common format, even including modular templates that encouraged amateur creators to substitute audio and visual content maximized for its obnoxiousness, its strangeness, or its triviality. Again, as in the case of Hampster Dance and others, this participatory mutating is both enabled *by* and enabling *of* community creation, as

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<sup>129</sup> <http://picard.ytmd.com/>. Accessed 11 January 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Redily, "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!" *ytmd.com*, <http://darthno.ytmd.com/>. Accessed 12 January 2019.

<sup>131</sup> ShadowSora, "NOOOller Coaster," *ytmd.com*, <http://vadercoaster.ytmd.com/>. Accessed 12 January 2019.

<sup>132</sup> See ben2theedge, "Darth Vader gets his Christmas Wish," *ytmd.com*, <http://vaderloveschristmas.ytmd.com/>; thisisit50, "SNOOOOOOOOOOWWWW!!!," *ytmd.com*, <http://darthsnow.ytmd.com/>. Accessed 12 January 2019.

remixers responding to each other's creations thereby iterated and articulated out a coherent format and aesthetic for YTMND pages.

While internet artifacts like the Hampster Dance and The Badger Song used sonic material that, though bizarre, might have been unquestionably identified as music by its listeners, YTMND pages' offerings were less often explicitly musical objects; rather, the sites performed looping sounds that, through their repetition, *became* musical. Indeed, Margulis stresses "the degree to which repetition can serve to musicalize"<sup>133</sup> other not-strictly-musical material. Citing Diana Deutsch's 1995 "Speech to Song Illusion," Margulis notes that "Repetition, in other words, causes ordinary speech to be perceived as music."<sup>134</sup> Listening to loops can prompt drastic shifts in media comprehension:

What's remarkable in this example [of the speech-to-music experiment of Deutsch] is that in shifting this way, we have the sensation that we're approaching the stimulus not in a slightly different manner, but rather as if it were a completely different stimulus altogether—as if speech had magically been transformed into music.<sup>135</sup>

Attending, for any extended amount of time, to a YTMND page, easily catalyzes such a shift. In YTMND's titular page, for example, the sample of Sean Connery's voice (which would begin when a user loaded the page, and continue on repeating until they navigated away) afforded a number of features that could be heard, after dozens of loops, as music. The rising and falling contour, outlining a sprechstimme-esque major triad. The emphasis on the syllables "You're" and "now," along with a pause at the moment of looped reloading, suggested a jerky triple meter. The strangeness, the humor of the initial phrase as semantic utterance, could disappear into banality

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<sup>133</sup> Margulis, *On Repeat*, 5.

<sup>134</sup> Margulis, *On Repeat*, 17.

<sup>135</sup> Margulis, *On Repeat*, 18.

through endless, unchanging repetition. Repetition with a difference, the difference being precisely the perceptual shift from listening to the strangeness of speech, to grooving along with the predictability of (boring, banal, annoying, but possibly pleasurable) musical sound. Users creating and circulating YTMND pages understood and exploited this affordance of looping, treating broad expanses of recorded pop culture sound as potentially-musicalizable resource.

YTMND was perhaps not “viral” in the same manner as the rest of this dissertation’s content, with enormous viewer/listenership, iterating creative production, and transmedial reportage and co-option coalescing around a single object in a limited temporal frame. Rather, it was a popular aggregating website with a sustained flow of humor-seeking online musickers—perhaps more of a meme than a virus.<sup>136</sup> But in its simple, constrained aesthetic modality, the site dramatized loops-as-musicking in a scrappy foreshadowing of viral musicking techniques to come.

### **Conclusion: Pivot to Video**

In presenting content made up of simple, small audiovisual loops, early internet media creators caught the attention of viewers with these artifacts’ banality and oddness. The loop as a format gestured to the imagined temporality of the internet - constantly connected, though potentially glitchy, stuttering. These loops suggested a digital temporal scale as well—both miniature and infinite. The hum of repeated binary calculations, switches of bits, lasting past the

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<sup>136</sup> While not explicitly viral, the site was considered a central node of early web humor, and was often featured (and circulated) alongside materials more closely to paradigmatic “viral” phenomena. See, for example, a nostalgic Gamespot post about early internet phenomena included YTMND in its selection, which also included this chapter’s Badgers animation, and other early-2000s viral videos like “Shoes” and “Charlie the Unicorn.” @doriean. “Early Internet Video Stars: Where are They Now.” *Gamespot.com* Posted 2 August 2016, <https://www.gamespot.com/gallery/early-internet-video-stars-where-are-they-now/2900-770/2/>. Accessed 17 July 2017.



capacity for human attention or endurance. In this way, the Hamster Dance loop was both subject to human creation and instantiation—its creator LaCarte, the Internet navigator requesting the page, and the mediating technologies and protocols in between—and capable of extending beyond human capacity.

More practically, the loop functionality was attention-getting, and potentially attention-keeping. Short repetition-unit durations meant that a viewer could view the whole unit in its entirety relatively quickly, while the loop's odd content or other parameters might have kept a viewer/listener intrigued. Musically, the loop unfolded over time, impressing a temporal alignment upon a viewer listener. The sonic component of the loop—real or implied—might have suggested a capacity for either pleasure-in-repetition, or have indicated the possibility of change, surprise. A listener familiar with music's tendency towards redundancy might have kept listening and watching for some time, understanding the repetitions of the loop as familiarizing units, expecting an interruption by contrast: a drop, bridge, or contrasting chorus. Such an incorrect orientation to these objects (as objects of change rather than endless, static repetition) might have been ascribed—especially in the days of GeoCities and the Hamster Dance—to users' unfamiliarity with the comic looping format. Their expectations would have been shaped by other audiovisual media, like popular songs, films, music videos. And yet, the experience of a listener to such an object might have undergone change over time, especially regarding objects like the *ytmd.com* sites. From enjoyment to annoyance and back again, and from musical speech into clipped, pulsing music, negotiated between the digital repetition and the viewer/listener's brain. After a few loops, Sean Connery starts to sing.

The loops of the early internet may have seemed uncannily infinite as users of the 1990s and early 2000s navigated to them, shared them, stared at them, were engrossed by them beyond

reason or articulation. While these loops might have manifested a fantasy of digital time, spinning endlessly on forever as single points in the fragmentary chaos of the World Wide Web, they often proved to be quite ephemeral, in fact—for the researcher, quite frustratingly so. A fantasy of infinite loops, perpetual motion via code and pixels, was confounded by human realities of lapsed domain hosting, corporate buyouts, or aesthetic updates over time. Many of the objects discussed in this chapter, and many more like them, that circulated in similar constellations or orbits, no longer exist—or they no longer exist in the forms that they did in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as stark individual pages, available to be laboriously navigated to and set to run for an indeterminate amount of time, so that a user might experience the same annoyance, amusement, or loop-induced trance chronicled above. Instead, many sites, especially those of quickly-produced imitations of a popular original, were sold or abandoned; those that were more popular (Hamster Dance and Badgers among them) were quickly updated into slicker commercial enterprises, with merchandise pages and the promotion of related content. This trend was bemoaned by early-internet nostalgists; *Ars Technica*'s Ken Fisher lamented 2005's hamsterdance.com as “a travesty of Hamster Dance exploitation,” with its sleek, professional animations (no more GIFs, now still images of a variety of hamsters in a rock band, with guitars and drum kit) and heavily-promoted site-branded products<sup>137</sup>.

For researchers, or for those seeking the “authentic” original experience of late-1990's internet phenomena, many sites such as these were lost to time, leaving ghostly traces whose content might be eagerly described in a forum post, but whose link redirects to an error message or unrelated page. Others could be glimpsed as partially-preserved artifacts in non-profit or

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<sup>137</sup> Fisher, “Top 10 Fads Online? Hold On.”

volunteer-based archives like the Internet Archive or the Know Your Meme database—but such spaces remain vulnerable to changes in personnel or corporate ownership.<sup>138</sup>

Enthusiast collections or re-creations provide yet another avenue of access to well-circulated “archaic” internet phenomena. Enterprising (or perhaps avaricious) fans of a popular site sometimes made mirrors or very close copies of it, or republished a site’s famous audiovisual content on another platform. This latter kind of (potentially-archival, potentially-mercenary) effort often fundamentally altered the presentation of the originals, however. In many cases, non-creator users preserved beloved bizarre internet ephemera by transferring them to new formats and platforms—for the objects in this chapter, the video platform YouTube has been a predominant location for re-homing. Such moves functioned, on the one hand, to direct internet traffic to the new (non-creator) uploader as well as (or instead of) the original site and creator; on the other hand, the proliferation of particular content furthered its spread and longevity, and the move to an aggregating platform, beyond a personally-owned single-serve website, often served to render that content more digitally durable, less likely to be abandoned or altered.

However, to publish a version of the Hampster Dance or Badgers onto a video-hosting site like YouTube requires a non-negligible altering of the ontology of the artifact, a fundamental change to its functioning and format. Transforming a single-serve site like Hampster Dance, a looping flash video like Badgers, or even a .GIF file like Dancing Baby into a video renders it

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<sup>138</sup> See *Internet Archive*, created in May 1996 (<https://archive.org/>); *Know Your Meme*, created in December 2008 (<https://knowyourmeme.com/>). *Know Your Meme* was acquired as part of Ben Huh’s online humor and content *Cheezburger Network* in 2011. The Internet Archive is a San Francisco-based nonprofit with an activist mission focused around the preservation and accessibility of a free and open internet, but this status is still not a guarantee of permanence; the election of US President Donald Trump in November 2016 spurred the archive’s founder Brewster Kahle to raise funds for the creation of a back-up archive in Canada, for example, based on Kahle’s concerns that Trump might move to restrict or censor internet freedoms. See Katie Barrett, “FAQs about the Internet Archive Canada,” *Internet Archive Blogs*, 3 December 2016. <https://blog.archive.org/2016/12/03/faqs-about-the-internet-archive-canada/>. Accessed 12 January 2019.

bounded, teleological—the loop becomes a feature of the video’s content, rather than a primary operating principle in the site’s or object’s code. More pragmatically, platforms like YouTube instituted standard limitations on duration (until 2010, ten minutes), and users themselves were limited in the file sizes they could conceivably create and upload.<sup>139</sup> Many users posted videos featuring one or two iterations of particularly beloved loops, forcing a user to restart frequently to achieve the trance-like loop viewing experience that Fisher admitted to in his 2003 Badgers review. But even a novelty ten-hour video version of a loop precludes the possibility of true endlessness, failing to render medial artifacts like the human and machine failures of looping sound and image slowly falling in and out of sync over dozens, hundreds, thousands of iterations.<sup>140</sup>

For a number of reasons—from rapidly expanding standards of user bandwidth and file-storage capacity, to the purchase of YouTube by Google and YouTube’s subsequent promotion and rise as a platform—the loop-as-internet-aesthetic paradigm lessened in the mid-2000s, giving way to a variety of more narrative, cinematic forms, to video rather than animation, and to higher overall production values. While this shift to new platforms and formats might be figured as a new (micro-)epoch in internet aesthetics, the loop certainly did not recede entirely—returning in force a few years later with the emergence of digital platforms like Vine (2013), and the continued, evolving popularity of .GIFs as a communicative format.

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<sup>139</sup> See @Maryrose, “Your 15 Minutes of Fame..ummm...Make that 10 Minutes or Less,” *YouTube Official Blog*, 26 March 2006, <https://youtube.googleblog.com/2006/03/your-15-minutes-of-fameummmmake-that-10.html>. Accessed 2 October 2018; Joshua Siegel, “Upload Limit Increases to 15 Minutes for All Users,” *YouTube Official Blog*, 29 July 2010, <https://youtube.googleblog.com/2010/07/upload-limit-increases-to-15-minutes.html>. Accessed 2 October 2018.

<sup>140</sup> See @10 Hour Weebl, “Badgers | 10 Hours,” *YouTube*, published 11 January 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGlyFc79BUE>. Accessed 2 October 2018.

Emerging from the constraints and affordances of early amateur World Wide Web usage, I have suggested here how dancing, musical loops functioned as a formative aesthetic feature of the early internet, reflecting late capitalist models of circulation alongside an imaginary of the emerging digital landscape as uncanny and infinite. In the next chapter, I turn to the mid-2000s and the viral circulation of amateur videos, suggesting how, in the circulation of many these videos, looping is used as a technique of *making musical*, with musicalization featuring as a central component of the broader *viralization* of a piece of audiovisual content. Cameraphones make public and private life sites for scrutiny, mockery, vernacular surveillance. YouTube makes that surveillance *broadcastable*. And loops make it aesthetically consumable: *musical*.

## CHAPTER 2: “BUS UNCLE,” “BED INTRUDER,” AND MUSICALIZING (AS) MASS SURVEILLANCE

### Introduction: A Story of Two Cell Phones

On April 26, 2006, on Hong Kong public bus 68X, 23-year-old Elvis Ho leaned forward to the older man seated in the row of seats in front of him, as the older man carried on a conversation on his mobile phone. Ho tapped the man on the shoulder, addressing him as “Uncle”—a typical Cantonese mode of address for a younger man speaking to an elder—and asked him to lower his voice. The older man in question, 51-year-old Roger Chan, did the opposite of lowering his voice. Instead, he exploded in a loud torrent of verbal abuse, yelling slurs about Ho’s mother and shouting about the pressures of modern urban life. This confrontation might have remained a barely-noteworthy commuter phenomenon, were it not for *another* phone, this one in the hand of onlooker and fellow passenger Jon Fong, who, seated across the bus aisle, used *his* phone’s ancillary capacity to record—and share—video of the altercation.<sup>1</sup>

I center this chapter around the story of these two cell phones—the one belonging to so-called “Bus Uncle” (“巴士阿叔”) Roger Chan, and the one belonging to impromptu amateur

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<sup>1</sup> @sjfgjj, “X尚義聲線高壓呀叔搭巴士途中問候後生仔,” *Youtube.com*, 29 April 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H20dhY01Xjk>. Accessed 10 February 2019.

The Cantonese title of the video references Hong Kong television football commentator Lin Shangyi, whose voice Fong clearly heard echoes of in Chan’s inflection and delivery. Early Sinophone coverage of the phenomenon directed users to search “林尚義” (Lin Shangyi) as a way of finding the video, since “巴士阿叔” (“Bus Uncle”) was not actually used anywhere in the original video’s searchable text parameters.

Throughout this chapter, translations are my own, supplemented and reinforced by translations in materials such as the video “巴士阿叔 - Bus Uncle (雙語字幕 - Bilingual Subtitles)” by @Bus Uncle 巴士阿叔, mentioned below, as well as Anglophone press coverage.

cameraman Jon Fong. This story—and the story of the resulting circulation and re-configuring of the video taken by Fong—provide a useful vantage from which to view the contestations and disruptions of social space and urban experience by the novel capacities of the mid-2000s mobile phone. Dramatized in the above confrontation and the following analysis, the cell phone figures as a catalyst for social rupture, nested within a tangle of issues and anxieties woven throughout early twenty-first-century urban life: warring concern and enthusiasm regarding the seemingly sprinting pace of technological development, the increasing ubiquity and always-on status of mass media and mediation, and concerns over surveillance and privacy (the former pervasively creeping into all aspects of life and the latter ever receding).

The “Bus Uncle” phenomenon moved globally through a heterogeneous mix of internet, print journalism, and word of mouth circulation. In the processes of such circulating, emergent internet-mediated practices like creating and sharing amateur audiovisual “mashups” were not simply auxiliary features. Despite their frequent minimization in press coverage, I argue that they were in fact *crucial* components of “Bus Uncle” and other such phenomena. Musical mashups—obnoxious, poorly-produced, seemingly trivial and trivializing as they might have been—were key factors in making viral events like “Bus Uncle” legible (or, perhaps more aptly, *audible*) to both journalistic institutions and a more broadly dispersed population.

In the preceding chapter, I showed how numerous 2000s-era viral (and would-be-viral) phenomena used continuously-cycling musical sounds as a functional formal component, while other content creators used looping as a *technique*, a means of making-musical that could be used to *musicalize* to non-musical material. In this chapter, I build on those modalities of viral musicking to suggest how the banality and humorous annoyance of looped sound was used by amateur remixers to render the “Bus Uncle” outburst (facetiously) as music. Such remixings,

afforded by increasingly accessible audiovisual editing software, as well as increases in hosting capacities of platforms like YouTube, functioned on the one hand as spaces for creativity, playfulness, and community-formation. But musicalizing the “Bus Uncle” encounter also functioned to normalize participatory and aestheticizing engagement in cameraphone-mediated acts of public surveillance and shaming—a technique with continued popularity across the late 2000s.

### **Sounding “Bus Uncle”**

Sound is central to the “Bus Uncle” phenomenon as a problematic; the video’s genesis, its circulation, its reception and manipulation all emerge from layers of intersecting negotiations around sound, noise, and music.

Sound is precisely what’s at issue in the incident on the bus—Chan’s conversation was perceived as problematic noise by Ho. What transpired was a breach following an act of civic correction or regulation, Ho’s imagined projection of a personal benefit into a public good. Within the situation on the bus, there was no way for Ho or other nearby travelers to sensorially avoid the noise of Chan’s speech; they couldn’t close off their ears like they might have been able to avert their eyes or otherwise cordon off another of their sensory faculties. This sensory unavoidability is an understood component of the audible—as Jonathan Sterne notes in his “audiovisual litany” critique in *The Audible Past*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sterne, *Audible Past*, 14. One might suggest that headphones could have helped function as “aversion” of Chan’s sonic disruption; precisely such a situation is one of the catalyzing scenarios for Michael Bull’s “sonically cocooned” headphone or earbud listener, to be discussed below. See Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Bull, *Sound Moves! iPod Culture and the Urban Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2007).



Sound of course is the parameter primarily engaged during the men's confrontation, drawing attention of other bus riders (and crucially, of bus rider Fong). But sound is the substance, as well, at least initially—the question is whether Chan will decrease the dynamic level of his voice, or, as it turns out, whether he will increase it.

Sound is the central issue in the bus incident because of its relationship with the mobile phone, in its 2006 Hong Kong manifestation. The increasingly-ubiquitous mobile phone made private communication portable—as Campbell and Park suggest, “space and time are *personalized* through mobile communication.” This sonic layer suggests intersection with the literature of mobile communication studies (MCS) (which, while broad and diverse, has not devoted significant amounts of scholarship to considerations of musical, aesthetic, or purely-sonic qualities of the communicated voice). In the context of MCS, the mobility of phone-as-device is often coupled with the necessity of communication via voice, suggesting mappings sound and the voice onto troubled and destabilized territories of the intimate, the private, and the simultaneous (in opposition to the exposed, the public, and the geographically distant).<sup>3</sup> This framing of the issue of sound, invoked in the press reporting around the Bus Uncle phenomenon as a metonym for broader concerns about urbanization and globalization, hearkens to long histories of anxieties around urban sound as health hazard.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Campbell's “From Frontier to Field: Old and New Theoretical Directions in Mobile Communication Studies,” provides an excellent overview of the topology of current and past approaches to MCM; while he mentions a strong current of MCM that draws on the sociological performance studies of Goffman and Turner, he does not mention any specific attention to sound outside of pragmatic information theory questions relating to questions of voice in terms of signal and noise. See Campbell, “From Frontier to Field: Old and New Theoretical Directions in Mobile Communication Studies,” *Communication Theory* 00 (2018): 1-20.

<sup>4</sup> See Samuel Llano, *Discordant Notes: Marginality and Social Control in Madrid, 1850-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); James Kennaway, *Bad Vibration: The History of the Idea of Music as Cause of Disease* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

Sound is significant as one of the recorded parameters of the video. In what follows, I frame the Bus Uncle video within a history of filmed surveillance, and histories of interpenetration between surveillance and cinema, regulation and entertainment; the capacity for Fong's cameraphone to record sound as well as video is a vital component of the media ecology emergent around this object and its enabled creations. The capacity of the 2006-era cameraphone allows for the use of sound as musicalizable material, but not *high-quality* material. Indeed, the poor sound quality becomes both artifact and effect in the viral video's remixing.

Sound was an important parameter of extra-internet viral circulation of the "Bus Uncle" phenomenon for a Cantonese-speaking audience, as bits of the Bus Uncle's rants were excerpted as indexical catchphrases in television, radio, protests and politics, and humorous everyday speech.

Sound was a problem, or at least a component part of a problem, of translation across global circuits. A variety of mediators helped negotiate this issue through various modes of translation, but the "problem" of translating sound semantically could, under certain conditions (like the enjoyment of a particularly musical mashup) be jettisoned in favor of pure sonorousness.

Sound in this object is—and is interpreted by its viewer/listeners as—a potentially-musical and potentially-aesthetic parameter. This aspect of the video's sound, the possibility of its excerption and interpretation as a vernacular Pierre-Schaefferian "sound object," what makes it possible to circulate as remix.

### **Bus Uncle: A Commuter on the Phone, a Commute on Video**

The story of this chapter is the story of two particular cell phones, and layers upon layers of sound and musicking. It began, as noted at the chapter's outset, on a Hong Kong public bus, with Roger Chan conversing on his phone, and Elvis Ho leaning forward to ask him to lower his voice. Chan did not lower his voice, launching into a verbal tirade instead. Video of the event was recorded by 68X bus passenger Jon Fong, on his Sony Ericsson cameraphone. In later interviews, Fong would attest that he began filming the argument as a sort of defensive evidence-gathering, in case the altercation escalated into violence. He would also tell reporters that making such videos was a hobby of his, and that he had intended to share this one with his friends.

While Fong's video was received as a somewhat novel entity—evidenced by its eventual record-breaking YouTube viewcount—the fact of the video itself was by no means groundbreaking, or even wholly unusual. In the mid-2000s, everyday sound and image were being made mobile and mutable by amateurs wielding portable, multicapacity devices—like the Sony Ericsson cameraphone on which Fong filmed Chan's and Ho's interaction. Hong Kong, in particular, was a locality with an “abnormally high penetration rate of mobile phone ownership”—the Hong Kong Office of the Telecommunications Authority reported rates at 117% in 2006.<sup>5</sup>

The mobile phone can be broadly construed as part of the wave of portable devices at the turn of the millennium that afforded users the capacity to variously segment and remediate everyday experience—everyday urban experience in particular. A rich literature on the mobile phone exists in the fields of social science, communications, and media studies; scholars Gerard

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<sup>5</sup> Larissa Hjorth, *Mobile Media in the Asia-Pacific: Gender and the Art of Being Mobile* (London: Routledge, 2009); 5.

Goggin and Jonathan Sterne have theorized the long roots of mobile telephony in histories of hearing and technologies meant to increase the portability of sound, while sociologists such as Richard Ling, Scott Campbell, Ran Wei and Louis Leung, Ged Murtagh and others have investigated various negotiations of public cell phone behavior—and misbehavior—at the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>6</sup> Though the discipline of Mobile Communication Studies comprises a rich literature at the nexus of communication theory, sociology, performance studies, geography, and even visual culture studies, attention to voice and sound exists largely in the realm of metaphor (voice as metonym for intimacy) or interface pragmatics (parameters of voice in terms of signal and noise).

Both Ichiyo Habuchi and Michael Bull have used the metaphor of the “cocoon” to suggest isolating possibilities of emerging mobile technologies at the turn of the twenty-first century. Habuchi suggests the notion of “telecocooning” to describe millennial-era youth behavior orienting towards a mobile phone (rather than the external public environment, or the prior technology of the pager) as center and site of sociality, while Bull theorized the headphone-wearing mobile device user to be ensconced within a “sonic cocoon” of their own managed design.<sup>7</sup> However, while the headphones of Bull’s sonic-cocoon-dwelling user solved, through hardware, the problem of sound’s public pervasiveness, the early twenty-first century’s cell

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<sup>6</sup> Gerard Goggin, *Cell phone Culture: Mobile Technology in Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Sterne, *The Audible Past*; Richard Ling, “‘One Can Talk About Common Manners!’: The Use of Mobile Telephones in Inappropriate Situations,” in *Themes in Mobile Telephony: Final Report of the COST 248 Home and Work Group*, 73-96, edited by Leslie Haddon, (Brussels: COST 248, 1997); Campbell, “Perceptions of Mobile Phones in College Classrooms,” *Communication Education* 55 (2006): 280–94; Ran Wei and Louis Leung, “Blurring Public and Private Behaviors in Public Space: Policy Challenges in the Use and Improper Use of the Cell Phone,” *Telematics and Informatics*, 16 (1999): 11–26; Ged Murtagh, “Seeing the ‘Rules’: Preliminary Observations of Action, Interaction and Mobile Phone Use,” in *Wireless World: Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age*, 81–91, edited by Barry Brown, Nicola Green, and Richard Harper (London, UK: Springer-Verlag, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Ichiyo Habuchi, “Accelerating Reflexivity,” in *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, 165–182, Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Misa Matsuda, eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

phone user retained a necessary, problematically spatially-transgressive *voice*. Indeed, it is partly through the medium of the voice that mobile phones have been theorized as bringing private intimacy into public—oftentimes with mixed or problematic results.<sup>8</sup> Scott Campbell and Yong Jin Park characterize the increased ubiquity of cell phones as part of a “personalization of private space,” underway in urban twentieth- and twenty-first-century environments. One effect of this “personalization,” Campbell and Park note, is that “copresent others” were “unwittingly cast into the role of audience member” in this technologized mashup of private and public.<sup>9</sup> Camera and videophones also enabled the *re*-publicizing of this precariously constructed intimacy—either to limited groups (such as the friends that Hong suggested, in interviews, that he tended to share his videos with) or to much larger publics, like the thousands, and then millions, of internet spectators who pushed the “Bus Uncle” video to the top of YouTube’s “most viewed” list in May 2006.

What Campbell and Park and others are theorizing in terms of a complicating of a private/public division is clearly centered around issues of *sound*: “[t]he mobile phone is now a common artifact in myriad public settings, offering a means for social connection for its users and unsolicited melodies, chirps, and half conversations for copresent others.” Indeed, Campbell’s recent review of the field suggests an entire vein of scholarship dealing with “the problem of mobile phone use in public”—i.e., the problem of private sound that mobile phone voice conversations introduce into public spaces. But even that cited construction suggests ways

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<sup>8</sup> See Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Bull, *Sound Moves! iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2007). This theorized listener, and their constructed condition of privatized, mobile, ubiquitous listening, will be taken up in a more central role in the fourth chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell and Park, “Social Implications of Mobile Telephony: The Rise of Personal Communication Society,” *Sociology Compass* 2/2 (2008): 377.

in which sound, as a particular parameter, is minimized within the discipline; MCM scholars have turned to sociological studies of performance emerging from the foundational work of Erving Goffman, but rarely interrogate sound itself beyond its understood capacity to engender (and thereby index) social relationships, and its assumed problematic tendency to disseminate ungovernably.

In my reading of the Bus Uncle phenomenon, I suggest an additional argument: that the voice in mobile phone usage functions as an articulation between noise and (meaningful) sound, affording options for engagement that extend beyond Goffman's "civil inattention," eavesdropping, or annoyance.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, I suggest that music suggests precisely another major (and largely overlooked) perspectival option in the renegotiations of space—and sound—necessitated by the emergence and ubiquitizing of mobile phones. Gerard Goggin, theorizing in his 2006 work *Cell Phone Culture*—a book published almost contemporaneously with the Bus Uncle event—tentatively hypothesized a new mode of photography and visual capture operating via camera phones. This mode of use Goggin likened to disposable camera photography—able to capture casual, mundane realities: the everyday, rather than the monumental. The cell phone, in this configuration, functioned not just as a mode of vocal and verbal communication, but as a "technology of everyday life" through which users mediated the "news" of their lives.<sup>11</sup> In a similar suggestion, Kate Crawford stresses how "the sharing of everyday actions, habits, and experiences—everyday 'trivia'—forges connections between individuals who are physically

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<sup>10</sup> This framework, drawn from Goffman's *Behavior in Public Places*, is one taken up by a number of MCS scholars. See Campbell, "From Frontier to Field," 8-10; Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on The Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: The Free Press, 1963).

<sup>11</sup> Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture*, 146.

remote from each other.”<sup>12</sup> The Bus Uncle phenomenon serves as a demonstration that the audio parameter of that audiovisual capture matters too—the cameraphone afforded not just visual “snapshots,” but the capture of mundane realities of “everyday sound.” And that users, in one-to-one communications, might mediate the “news” of their audiovisual lives, but that the sonorous plane of that “news” might suggest new sites for *remediation*—for the transformation of everyday life into mediated “news,” and the transformation of that “news” into humorous, annoying, befuddling music.

### **Seeing and Hearing “Bus Uncle”**

Ultimately, the altercation between Chan and Ho did not escalate into physical violence—instead, as many would gleefully note, the video concludes ironically with Chan receiving and answering a different phone call. So, rather than sharing the video with authorities, or using it as evidence in juridical proceedings, Fong uploaded his video to the internet, specifically to newly-emerged video-hosting sites: Hong Kong Golden Forum, Google Video, and YouTube. [Figure 10]

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<sup>12</sup> Crawford, “These Foolish Things: On Intimacy and Insignificance in Mobile Media,” in *Mobile Technologies: From Telecommunications to Media*, edited by Gerard Goggin and Larissa Hjorth (New York: Routledge, 2009); 252.



Figure 10: “Bus Uncle” video on YouTube, May 2006.

The video clearly begins after the altercation’s initiation; Chen’s body and voice are both raised against Ho at the video’s outset. Fong’s original video is just under six minutes in duration, and consists largely of Chan speaking loudly, taking up most of the sonic space, with Ho offering less frequent, quieter rejoinders. Apart from the two men’s voices, the video’s soundtrack includes artifacts of the public transportation soundscape. The noise of the bus’s engine at points registers as pitch, rising and falling with the bus’s changing speed. Other sounds are occasionally audible: the waft of a snippet of Cantopop, perhaps issuing from the mobile device of a different passenger. A pre-recorded female voice announces a stop.



The two men's voices present sharp contrast to both this backdrop, and to each other; their words are clearly audible, and clearly differentiated throughout the video. Chan's words are delivered loudly, sharply, and at a pitch level consistently higher than Ho's. His voice often maxes out the capacities of the cameraphone's recorder, which buzzes and clips around it. Ho speaks softly, often just above the threshold of audibility for the recording device. The two generally speak in counterpoint, with Chan dominating the sonic space, often repeating the same phrase or variations on it. Ho responds less frequently, and at times there are charged moments where neither speak, just staring at each other.

The sounds emanating from the two men are in some ways mirrored by their visual presentation. Ho's posture is, in large part throughout the video, aggressively relaxed; for much of the confrontation, his right elbow is thrown back over the seat behind him, while he slouches down. Chan's posture contrasts sharply. He is upright, standing and leaning over his own row of seats, gesticulating into Ho's space with points and jabs emanating from his left arm's shoulder and elbow, ending at the tip of his rigidly-extended forefinger.

But though all of this is clear, the video is nonetheless not at all a tidy cinematic experience; it near-constantly reminds viewers of its mode of—and status as—mediation. The sound and image quality are not high quality, though both parameters render the scene comprehensibly. Additionally, there are many moments in which the image shakes, swoops, or is rapidly jarred—perhaps by an unexpected movement by the bus, perhaps in an effort by the filmer to remain undetected in his surreptitious recording. These visual disruptions remind the viewer/listener of the hand—quite literally!—of the filmmaker, and of the existence, the capacities, and the medially of the cameraphone in it.

By May 9<sup>th</sup>, the video had almost 900,000 views on YouTube. By May 24<sup>th</sup>, it had over 1.7 million. By June 3<sup>rd</sup> its viewcount approached 3 million.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, these numbers set a record; the video was the most viewed on the YouTube platform for the month of May 2006. The video was affective. It inspired incredulous laughter at Chan's antics, and at his idiosyncratic, repetitious rhetoric. Clearly the novelty of the video was a factor too—Fong's ability to capture this charged encounter in a mode that indexed "real" and "direct"ness. But a reading of the video's early comments reveals a healthy smattering of rage as well. Commenters condemned Chan's behavior and critiqued Ho's passivity, performing aggressive heteronormative masculinity in elaborate imagined fantasies of what kind of violence they might have enacted on Chan, had they been in Ho's place. (Such commentary was frequently coupled with homophobic rhetoric directed at Ho.)

In addition to this outpouring of affect, the video was not, of course, a singular, isolated object; during this time, a wide variety of related audiovisual objects had been created in response and in dialogue with the original. One of the earliest variants, and perhaps the most central to the video's eventual global spread, were videos that addressed a particular sonic problem: the limited accessibility of the video's Cantonese-language conversation.<sup>14</sup> Several videos—many of them racking up impressive view totals of their own—provided subtitles for the video in Chinese hanzi, English, and a variety of other languages.<sup>15</sup> Alongside (and following

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<sup>13</sup> These numbers are available via Internet Archive's various captures of the original YouTube video's page. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20060603034507/http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H20dhY01Xjk>.

<sup>14</sup> This is evidenced in the earliest comments posted in response to the original video. Many of them are in English, and are either requests for a translation (exact or paraphrased), or are paraphrased translations being supplied as community-serving behavior.

<sup>15</sup> For example, @Bus Uncle 巴士阿叔, "巴士阿叔 - Bus Uncle (雙語字幕 - Bilingual Subtitles)," 11 May 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSHziqJWYcM&mode=related&search=>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

from) these videos, other users created and circulated more highly manipulated versions of the video, remixing the words of the argument—Chan’s words, in particular—across a variety of genres and audiovisual formats. It was, in part, the constellation of discourse and mutative creation around the video that spurred it to receive its first journalistic attention, a few weeks after its initial upload.

### **Bus Uncle in the News**

In the months following Fong’s posting of the video on YouTube, its consumption there, and its mutation and dissemination across other internet platforms, the Bus Uncle phenomenon was remediated onto the pages of newspapers across the world, as the video and its constellation of participatory responses racked up views. Beginning with a report in the Hong Kong tabloid *Apple Daily* on May 17, 2006, a variety of print newspapers across Hong Kong published “Bus Uncle” feature stories.<sup>16</sup> Major global press reportage followed over the next few weeks, with Anglophone examples alone published as far afield as Ireland, Canada, and Tulsa, Oklahoma. The collected news features endeavored to address the phenomenon as a prism, drawing a variety of angles out from it. Despite this intended breadth, and despite the publications’ spread across time and geography, however, the reportage around the Bus uncle phenomenon tended to cohere around a number of shared components. Some of these shared components are familiar from Internet and “viral” reportage from the preceding chapters, but some novel congruences arise as well, both effect and evidence of the particular 2006 media assemblage.

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<sup>16</sup> Sun Baiwen, “Goldfinger: Bus Uncle Online Short Film,” *Apple Daily*, 17 May 2006. <https://hk.finance.appledaily.com/finance/daily/article/20060517/5932194>. Accessed 10 February 2019.

First, many of the articles characterized the “Bus Uncle” confrontation as a microcosmic distillation of contemporary urban anxieties, with the key word “pressure” indexing the strains of urban crowding, underemployment, and precarious labor. Geoffrey Fowler, writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, suggested that “in Hong Kong, [the video] has a special resonance. For many, Bus Uncle personifies the stresses of life in their city.”<sup>17</sup> This suggestion was foregrounded by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, which republished the *Wall Street Journal* article under the headline “Bus Uncle Craze in Hong Kong Reflects City Stress.”<sup>18</sup> Hong Kong, Fowler noted, “boasts some of the densest urban residential areas on the planet and an intensity that many people find exhausting.”<sup>19</sup>

Other reporting on the video and phenomenon used them in service of raising a variety of other, broader issues. Some linked Chan’s outburst to road rage, centering the commute as a site of common ground for readers, a shared and familiar locus of contemporary urban stress. Other reporting commended Ho as a defender of the peace, valorizing bystander engagement in perceived instances of social breach.<sup>20</sup> Such framings generally opened up broader discussions of appropriate civil and civic behavior in urban social environments and contexts. These linkages interpolated the video into coherent social framings extending “beyond” the internet into “the real world,” encouraging newspaper readers to draw connections between themselves, their experiences, and those of the video’s personnel, despite potential barriers of language and

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<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey A. Fowler, “A Six-Minute Tirade on a Hong Kong Bus Rides Into Vernacular,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 June 2006. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB114962497534572979>. Accessed 1 February 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey A. Fowler, “‘Bus Uncle’ Craze in Hong Kong Reflects City Stress,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 7 June 2006. <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/world/2006/06/07/Bus-Uncle-craze-in-Hong-Kong-reflects-city-stress/stories/200606070196>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Fowler, “A Six-Minute Tirade.”

<sup>20</sup> This contrasted with more colloquial response to Ho, adduced above from video comments.

distance; Eugene Robinson, writing in *Tulsa World*, suggested that “I am Bus Uncle, potentially, and so are you. Each of us has a tiny, raging Bus Uncle buried deep within, just waiting to burst free. One tap on the shoulder is all it takes.”<sup>21</sup>

These journalistic reports of Bus Uncle also tended to engage in what Bolter and Grusin dub “remediation,” providing an alternative media framework in efforts to comprehensibly situate the novel constellation of the cameraphone video, the YouTube platform, the Internet, and Internet-enabled participatory behavior, fitting the whole within understood models afforded by extant, older media forms.<sup>22</sup> Largely, in attempting to wrangle some sense out of the phenomenon, the print media journalists tended to treat the video of the Bus Uncle confrontation as a *film*—as though the mediation of the incident through video recording and internet re-broadcasting alone infused it with qualities of narrative, and shaped it in terms of cinematic tropes.<sup>23</sup> Reporters referred to “Bus Uncle” Chan and his interlocutor Ho as “protagonists.” Brian Boyd of *The Irish Times* called the video “the new blockbuster of the summer” and Eugene Robinson’s *Tulsa World* article classified it as “cinema vérité, captured surreptitiously with a cell

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<sup>21</sup> Eugene Robinson, “Smile, you might be a Bus Uncle,” *Tulsa World* Saturday, June 10, 2006, [http://www.tulsaworld.com/archives/smile-you-might-be-a-bus-uncle/article\\_8ba893f7-2094-57da-b522-1b4a939e4df7.html](http://www.tulsaworld.com/archives/smile-you-might-be-a-bus-uncle/article_8ba893f7-2094-57da-b522-1b4a939e4df7.html). Accessed 10 February 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*.

<sup>23</sup> This accords somewhat with journalistic remediation of YouTube as a platform more broadly at precisely this time—though while reportage on individual videos tended to treat them as “films” or “film clips,” coverage of the *platform* tended to frame it in terms of television. This was deployed in part as a figurative strategy, helping an audience come to terms with a new potentially-unfamiliar medium through analogy with an extant, more familiar one. The relating of YouTube to television was also an address to anxieties around the website’s potential to undercut television and acquire its audience; mainstream journalism around YouTube at this time almost inevitably involved discussions of this concern from television industry personnel (often linked to concerns about YouTube’s potential for hosting copyrighted or “pirated” material).

The headlines alone of pieces like “Lights, Camera and Online Video Action” or “The New Must-See on your PC: YouTube” provide evidence of this discursive trend. See Michael Liedtke, “Lights, Camera and Online Video Action,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 2006: 28; Michelle Quinn, “The New Must-See on your PC: YouTube,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 7 June 2006.

phone camera,” pointing out that “Like all great films, this one has a perfect ending”—that is, the video concludes as Chan turns to answer another phone call.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to attempting to remediate the “Bus Uncle” video within the grammar and form of film, many of the articles also took space to explain YouTube as a platform, addressing readers’ assumed unfamiliarity with the site and its contents and affordances. Robinson situated it as “one of the Web sites where users can post their homemade short videos”; Boyd’s *Irish Times* coverage provided a bit of history of the platform’s founders, before suggesting that YouTube’s “sheer quirkiness makes it unlikely to be co-opted into the mainstream (for the moment anyway).”<sup>25</sup> Quirky or not, the proliferation of such articles—outside of “tech corner” and other novelty columns—demonstrates that YouTube, via such phenomena as “Bus Uncle,” had become a site of journalistic attention. The platform and its content had achieved a global plane of traditional media comprehensibility, with the oddity of an amateur video at the “top of the [online video] charts” prompting journalistic scrutiny and analysis. Even as the framings above suggested a broad lack of familiarity with the platform among the papers’ readerships, they demonstrated the assumed task of print news media to train readers in internet literacy. Through such training, legacy media like print newspapers helped to establish and circulate the legible parameters for virality.

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<sup>24</sup> See Boyd, “Next Stop: Stardom,” illustrated by Peter Hanan, *The Irish Times Weekend Review* 10 June 2006: 5; Robinson, “Smile, You Might be a Bus Uncle.”

<sup>25</sup> See Robinson, “Smile, You Might be a Bus Uncle” and Boyd, “Next Stop: Stardom.”

## Mashing Up Bus Uncle

The print journalism that covered the Bus Uncle phenomenon acknowledged, without fail, the existence of various online mashups of the original video, often describing them with mixed confusion and amusement. These “mutated” versions of the original were largely treated as oddities vestigial to the main event by the journalists reporting on the phenomenon; mainstream coverage, especially in more prestigious publications, tended to center more around the various figures in the video, and on positing connections between the video and larger “serious” social issues. Here, as in the preceding chapters, however, I contend that the mashups—and their circulation and consumption alongside circulation and consumption of the original video—comprised an important component of the viral musicking taking place. Despite their marginalization in traditional journalistic media, these mashups were in fact key components in the viral transmission that eventually would *alert* journalists and other extra-Internet consumers to the status of the phenomenon as “news” or newsworthy. They would also help boost viewership of the original video. Indeed, it’s no coincidence that major Anglophone journalistic outlets began rushing to publish features on Bus Uncle in *June* of 2006—more than a month after the video’s original uploading. This wave of press came in the wake of the announcement that Fong’s video was the top-viewed video on the YouTube platform in May.<sup>26</sup> The nearly three million views that comprised that record accrued as part of a participatory constellation of viewing interrelated videos, officially indexed in YouTube’s “Related” video

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<sup>26</sup> None of the Anglosphere reportage cited above was published before June. See, for instance Marianne Bray, “Irate HK Man Unlikely Web Hero,” *CNN.com*, 9 June 2006, <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/asiapcf/06/07/hk.uncle/>. Accessed 2 February 2019. Bray does at least suggest a relationship between the remixes and the skyrocketing viewcount by placing the two in textual proximity, noting that the video “became the most viewed video on YouTube.com in May, with nearly three million people flocking to see the original and its incarnations, like the Karaoke version, the rap remix and the dance and disco take.” This comes after Bray’s explanation of YouTube as “a new and massive Web phenomenon” in its own right.

sidebar and vernacularly through hyperlinked sharing in videos' comment sections. Creatively remixed versions both contributed to cycles of watching and re-watching (crucially, increasing the original's viewcount), and marked Bus Uncle *as* viral through their presence—though this isn't made explicit in journalistic coverage, I suggest that alternative remixed versions were, by this point, both *constitutive* of and *implicational* of an object's virality.

While print reporters addressed the “Bus Uncle” clip largely as a case study for social issues, or viewed it as a hit film, then, it is clear that a number of *non*-journalistic participants in the Bus Uncle phenomenon had already understood the mediated encounter as having, not just visual or cinematic, but *musical* potential—and these participants were invested in conveying that potential to others, through their own creations. “Musical potential”—here and in the case of other early viral objects, those in the preceding chapter and those circulating more broadly—was clearly not synonymous with any typical markers of positive musical or aesthetic “value.” No rich or complex harmonies, no sophisticated melodies, no colorful timbres or virtuosic performance. Instead, the aesthetic paradigm adduced through the various creations and “mutations” in this and the preceding chapter sets value on surprise, humor, and oftentimes even downright annoyance—what Carol Vernallis terms YouTube's “whoopie cushion aesthetic”: short, amusing, and vulgar.<sup>27</sup>

Under this viral aesthetic paradigm, a number of components of the original “Bus Uncle” video could be viewed as fitting and ready for remix. Among them: Roger Chan's distinctive clipped and piercing timbre, coated in the fuzzy distortion of the low-quality recording equipment in Jon Fong's cell phone; his evocative text, clearly declaimed; and the short, punchy

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<sup>27</sup> Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 127.



rhythms of his words. All these were prime material for chopping, splicing, and recontextualizing, all while retaining a clear sonic link to the originary source video.

In the video, Chan's prominent status as the aggressor anti-hero aligns felicitously with the suitability of the sonic parameters of his spoken text for remixing purposes. His words and phrases are the most clearly rendered in the file, in part because of his voice's high volume and his consistent use of a relatively high pitch register. Further, despite his elevated emotional state, Chan doesn't rush or compress his speech into incomprehensibly. Instead, many of his articulations are separated out by clear blocks of silence, or at least non-speech, in which Chan and Ho regard each other over the hum of the bus engine.

One of the ways in which this musical potential was most easily realized was through the technique of looping words or phrases excerpted from Chan's speech. Citing Diana Deutsch's "Speech-to-Song" Illusion, Elizabeth Margulis notes how repetition itself serves as a demarcating factor between the acoustic domains of language and music, stressing "the degree to which repetition can serve to musicalize" nominally "nonmusical" material. This capacity of repetition engenders a sensorial shift that Margulis calls "remarkable": "we have the sensation that we're approaching the stimulus not in a slightly different manner, but rather as if it were a completely different stimulus altogether—as if speech had magically been transformed into music."<sup>28</sup> Such a "magical" transformation is effected widely in early Internet amateur audiovisual aesthetic practice, from last chapter's YTMND sites, through various Bus Uncle musicalizations analyzed here.

Additionally, a move towards the musical is theorized as a move *away* from semantic or narrative meaning. Like the YTMND sites, many of the Bus Uncle remix examples looped

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<sup>28</sup> Margulis, *On Repeat*, 18.

particular short words or phrase repeatedly, creating, in Richard Middleton's terms, "relatively monadic-tending musical structures" in which "the signifiers denote, as it were, themselves to an extreme degree, freeing themselves from external referents and driving towards a closed system through 'introversive signification'."<sup>29</sup> That is, the repetition of words like "閉" ("fuck") in Bus Uncle remixes remove this swear from its rhetorical context in Bus Uncle's rhetoric, and reorient a listener's attention to it *as* a word. Similarly to Middleton, Margulis stresses the universal centrality of repetition in music as "not an arbitrary characteristic that has arisen in a particular style of music; rather, it is a fundamental characteristic of what we experience as music."<sup>30</sup> Repetition, she argues, suggests aesthetic, rather than semantic or narrative, content. Its occurrence—and recurrence—nudges a listener towards an appropriate attendant listening orientation. "閉" shifts from swear to sound.

Perhaps such a syllable might function as a perverse Pierre Schaefferian "sound object," which Brian Kane suggests "only truly emerges when a sound no longer functions for *another* as a medium, but rather is perceived *as such*." Indeed, like the YTMND materials discussed in the last chapter, some of Chan's particular turns of phrase were both semantically memorable for a Cantonese-speaking audience, and particularly almost-musical, even prior to the intervention of looping remixers. For example, Chan's shout of "我有壓力, 你有壓力" or "I've got pressure; you've got pressure" is a neat parallel structure, almost too suggestive of its suitability for the establishment of a duple-meter loop; the phrases are both not-quite minor-third descents, with the second starting a half step below the first. Likewise, Chan's repeated "未解決"—translated as

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Middleton, "'Play It Again Sam': Some Notes on the Productivity of Repetition in Popular Music," *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 236.

<sup>30</sup> Margulis, *On Repeat*, 5.

“unresolved” or “It’s not finished”—provides a three-syllable pattern with a rising-and-falling contour. In the un-remixed original, Chan’s three repetitions begin about a step higher each time, but keep a precise rhythmic profile, locking a listener into a momentary groove, against which Ho’s changing responses provide a dynamic counter melody.

These sonically-evocative moments would make their way into usage outside a digital context, becoming viral catchphrases parodied and peppered through the real-life speech of Hong Kong youth and internet enthusiasts, as well as across television, radio, and other popular audio(visual) media. Not just their semantic quirkiness, but also their quasi-musical *catchiness*—these phrases’ singable pleasure as sounding speech—functioned as vector for viral media-jump, from video to “meatspace” spoken language.<sup>31</sup>

But Chan’s idiosyncratic turns of phrase were understood to be highly useful in a context of musical remix as well. In a study of all videos posted to YouTube with the keyword “Bus Uncle” between the original video’s posting and June 2007, Donna Chu notes that the three sonic elements mentioned above—“I’ve got pressure/you’ve got pressure,” “Unresolved!” and Chan’s Cantonese swears (especially “悶”)—make up the vast majority of the borrowings in mutated

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<sup>31</sup> This is in addition to the migration of the Bus Uncle phenomenon to other NON-audiovisual media, like webcomics, tote bags, and t-shirts. I see the proliferation of these kinds of affiliated products as less integral to the 2000s/2010s viral process than musical response, but acknowledge that they are part of a broader trend of monetization, attempts to transduce virality (perhaps “viral capital”) to economic capital through the creation of salable commodities that indexically point to the viral artifact. The Beyoncé surprise album release that I analyze in Chapter 5 successfully collapses this set of processes, so that purchase of a single commodity essentially *becomes* the viral phenomenon.

A more commodified—but still sonic—feature of the Bus Uncle constellation was the proliferation of ringtones made from the video’s catchphrases. As Sumanth Gopinath notes, the ringtone’s rise (and fall) was deeply connected with the advent and growing ubiquity of the mobile phone across the late 1990s and first decade of the 2000s; Gopinath’s work on ringtone as central to and indicative of “the momentous transformations in the music industry and the consumer’s experience of music resulting from the digitization of sound and from its articulation with mobile devices” is a history that in many ways parallels the work I’m undertaking in this dissertation. See Gopinath, *The Ringtone Dialectic: Economy and Cultural Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013): xiii.

mashups of the Bus Uncle original.<sup>32</sup> Chu's study also highlights the prevalence of "purely musical" adaptations of this video—many of the Bus Uncle mutations circulating on YouTube used single static images, or even blank black frames, casting a viewer's full attention onto a remixed sonic product.<sup>33</sup> Remixes of this variety required less technical proficiency and software capacity to produce, though the results were accordingly sometimes rudimentary or low-quality. One video used the final of the three "Unresolved!" shouts as a looped clip over the top of a zingy electronic dance music track; though the editing of the track was relatively poor, leaving glitchy milliseconds of silence between many of the loops, the video still garnered several hundred thousand views.<sup>34</sup> For its visual parameter, the video used a popular bit of circulating Bus Uncle iconography: a manipulated "promotional poster" for an imagined action film featuring Chan, in a wide-legged stance atop a double decker bus, with a dark cityscape behind him. Another popular remix, featuring the same static visual, effected a more complicated mutation, interleaving Bus Uncle audio into "煞科," a track by millennial Cantopop star Sammi Cheng.<sup>35</sup> Taking advantage of striking similarities in inflection and pitch between clips of the Bus Uncle video and the rapped components of the pop song, the remixer deftly inserted phrases

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<sup>32</sup> Donna Chu, "Collective Behavior in YouTube: A Case Study of 'Bus Uncle' Online Videos, *Asian Journal of Communication* 19/3 (2009): 343.

<sup>33</sup> See Chu, "Collective Behavior in YouTube," 344.

<sup>34</sup> @雪奇, "巴士呀叔 Remix Music !! [Bus Uncle Remix Music !!]," *YouTube.com*, 20 May 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RELqUQsoZI>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>35</sup> @quiio, "煞科 (ft. 巴士阿叔)," *YouTube.com*, 19 May 2006, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dwy3\\_RrGnZg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dwy3_RrGnZg). Accessed 2 February 2019.

"煞科" can be roughly translated as "The End" or "It's Over."

like “Unresolved!” into humorous dialogue with Cheng’s uptempo electropop lyrics about a relationship’s end.

A more technically-involved video uploaded on June 6, 2006 by YouTube user “deadasoren” made copious use of Bus Uncle’s most profane utterances—especially “屌/閑” (“diu,” Cantonese for “fuck”) and Bus Uncle’s pointed comments regarding Ho’s mother—to establish a humorous intertextual interaction with American gangsta rap and audiovisual popular culture more broadly.<sup>36</sup> The video’s title, “巴士阿叔 [Bus Uncle] bus uncle song MTV: Diu [fuck](rap remix),” snugly—and seemingly facetiously—juxtaposes the original amateur video against a context of professional music videos, offering up the vulgar catchphrase as the title of this quasi-aspirational “track.” In the track, samples of Chan’s Bus Uncle speech are rhythmically looped and overlaid on the backbeat and gunshot sound effects of Dr. Dre’s 1999 gangsta rap hit “Bang Bang.” These samples are presented somewhat ridiculously, with the word “閑” sometimes being looped multiple times in a row. In breaks between this musically-manipulated cursing are bouts of “rapping” composed of excerpts in which Chan deploys various conjugations of the preceding term. Excerpted from their original context and delivered in lip-sync by the video’s creator, these become parodic bravado-laden phrases about the performer’s sexual capacity. The video’s visuals showcase the creator in the position of rapper, aggressively occupying the space of the video’s frame. He leans towards the camera, tilting up his chin and throwing up middle fingers. The visuals match this facetious indexing of a gangsta rap aesthetic. Too-on-the-nose images of buses driving by in slow motion are intercut with shots of urban life—wide, desaturated shots of graffitied walls, coupled with close-ups of pigeons. Additionally,

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<sup>36</sup> deadasoren, “巴士阿叔 bus uncle song MTV: Diu (rap remix),” *YouTube.com*, 6 June 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjRcXLK5T4g>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

in what might read as a satirizing of gangsta rap's performance of heteronormative masculinity (one that might find resonances in Chan's threats to fuck Ho's mother), other shots in the video act as visual puns indicating intercourse. Shots zoom in on a pinup girl's ass, or cycle quickly between still images of attractive, suggestively-posed women; these shots are timed so that the cutting rhythms match the successive hits of the Cantonese "fuck." The video both seems to mock American gangsta rap's misogyny (and, perhaps, takes a dig at the genre's simplicity and repetition), while actively performing an objectification of women all too pervasive across millennial vernacular internet spaces.<sup>37</sup> On a more practical note, the video includes English captions throughout, suggesting a target audience from the outset that extends beyond Cantonese speakers.

The above examples circulated among a broad catalog of other "versions," from remixes accompanied by Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* or the "Imperial March" from John Williams's scores to the *Star Wars* films.<sup>38</sup> As Chu notes, other non-musical remixes existed as well, often in the form of synthesized conversations between Chan and other figures from television broadcasts, movies, or other popular Cantonese media. But while the latter videos' audiences were largely limited to Hong Kong, musical remixes were broadly shared and consumed outside of a Cantonese-speaking listenership—evidenced in part by YouTube

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<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that many of the comments on the video seem to read it as a condemnation of gangsta rap's technical and lyrical simplicity—and take issue with this understood depiction. Many comments vary on a theme of "you can't just repeat the word 'fuck' and call it rap." Few to none of the comments take note of the issues of misogyny or objectification raised by the video, however.

<sup>38</sup> See Fowler, "A Six-Minute Tirade." Unfortunately, these two videos—which received a wide amount of coverage in American and other Anglophone press, likely because of the familiarity of their Anglophone pop culture intertexts—are among the vast swath of audiovisual material from this phenomenon that no longer exist, having perhaps been subject to YouTube takedowns, or perhaps simply having been deleted as their original users purged or deleted their accounts on the platform. Clear lacunae like these are an ever-present reminder that digital-era archives and archiving practices are just as contingent and potentially unstable as more "traditional" archives, despite utopic or uncritical imaginings to the contrary.

commenters sharing and discussing translations in a variety of languages. Indeed, such a situation might re-invoke the Schaefferian “sound object” as a problematic here. For viewer/listeners without knowledge of Cantonese, the separated syllable-objects clipped from Chan’s speech could not possibly hold semantic function. But what they might retain is a signifying function of otherness, distance, strangeness. Musicalization-through-repetition both collapses the issue of semantic speech, making semantic comprehension an impossible, unnecessary non-factor, while in a sense foregrounding it as an issue, presenting the unknown syllable as an index of inaccessible meaning over, and over, and over again.

“Bus Uncle’s” YouTube-charting May 2006 viewcount may have been the catalyst to the flurry of articles about the video in print journalism outlets, but far from indicating a stationary audience for a single video, the dramatic viewing numbers emerged from a positive feedback loop of circulation between amateur musical producers, their products, and a consuming, sharing audience. “Bus Uncle” wasn’t just Jon Fong’s video original—it was the *Adagio for Strings* mashup, it was Big D’s rap, and it was every confused viewer who pulled in a friend or family member to say “Have you seen this yet? Okay, now you HAVE to hear the techno remix!”

A 2007 theorization of “mashups” by Michele Jackson suggests possible alignments both with a twenty-first-century vernacular “sound object” ideal and with the broader issues of aestheticized surveillance to which I will turn next.<sup>39</sup> Jackson links the mashup technique with changing modes of media and of processing and parsing the world, characterizing mashups as “not montages or summaries” but instead “forms of communication that depend—crucially—on unceasing transformation and accumulation of communication acts and interaction into data.”

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<sup>39</sup> Michele H. Jackson, “The Mash-Up: A New Archetype for Communication,” *The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14/3 (2009): 730.

“Data,” in this definition, are construed as decontextualized communication events, removed from connection to a particular place and time. Amateur mashups turned Bus Uncle into data—both social data on urban pressure and stress, and sonic or musical data, able to infuse new and humorous meaning into Dr. Dre’s rap beats, or Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*. New capacities of twenty-first century mobile phones reshaped the available scope for the capture of such data, and looping musicalizing offered one parameter for its recontextualization as viral musicking.

### **Always Watching, Always Listening: Bus Uncle as Surveillance**

Another near-ubiquitous trope in the journalistic reportage around the Bus Uncle phenomenon was anxiety regarding technology and surveillance. Often citing television show *Candid Camera*, discourse in print journalism often framed cameraphones as amateur surveillance equipment, wielded ubiquitously by citizen-spies and capable of bringing down the overzealous, policing wrath of mass consuming and judging publics. For example, Howard Kurtz, in a cultural miscellany column of *The Washington Post*, wrote that “[t]he ubiquity of feature-packed mobile phones and stationary security cameras means that everybody’s always potentially on *Candid Camera*. So don’t forget to smile.”<sup>40</sup>

More particularly, Tony Chan asked in his conclusion to an article on Bus Uncle in *Wireless Asia*:

As the nature of the mobile phone changes from a communications tool to a multi-function device capable taking photos, recording conversations and capturing video, what are the implications for privacy, intellectual property, rights of the individual and so on?

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<sup>40</sup> Howard Kurtz, “Media Notes: Cats and Dogs Edition,” *The Washington Post*, Thursday, June 8, 2006. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/blog/2006/06/08/BL2006060800389\\_3.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/blog/2006/06/08/BL2006060800389_3.html). Accessed 11 February 2019.



Has Big Brother, or at least his close relative, arrived amongst us in the form of the mobile phone?<sup>41</sup>

What this shows is that the impact of mobile phones on our society goes far beyond just the ability to get in contact with each other anywhere, anytime... Now, with the introduction of video recording, it seems anything out of the ordinary risks being recording and broadcast to everyone on the Internet.

Chan here cites “Big Brother,” but his description of the phenomenon indicates that the threat of surveillance doesn’t come from an all-seeing, all-hearing governmental (or other top-down) apparatus. Instead, the threat of observation comes from multiply, mobile connected users. Further, Chan’s concern is not just contained to his interpretation of what the video demonstrates about the realities of vernacular surveillance already in place. He also articulates anxieties regarding the video’s *effects*:

So it seems that all those fancy features and capabilities that vendors have spent billions of dollars developing and integrating into their latest handsets, are being used after all. More importantly, now many more people will know the extent of the capabilities of their latest handsets.

At least some two million viewers of the clip will now know that they can get a mobile phone that can take video, if they don’t have one already, and that if they somehow find themselves in the right place, at the right time and catch the right footage, then they stand a chance to become the next joeyip3268, who has been interviewed on TV and sold part of the footage to a tabloid magazine.<sup>42</sup>

At issue here is not only that the Bus Uncle video manifests an extant predilection for anonymous amateur videoing. The fear expressed here is that the video and its circulation (or those of other similar viral outbreaks) will function *pedagogically*, training phone users in public capture, surveillance, and sharing. As I will argue below, while the video may have behaved as a

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<sup>41</sup> Tony Chan, “Bus Uncle and Big Brother,” *Wireless Asia*, June 2006: 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

pedagogical tool, so too did processes of musicalization within the viral circulation of Bus Uncle, normalizing and aestheticizing Jon Fong's initial act of public audiovisual capture.

Of course, a connection between entertaining media developments and systems of surveillance was neither entirely novel nor necessarily central to a twenty-first-century regime of digital surveillance and data-capture. Indeed, the braiding of comedy and surveillance has a long history in mass media forms. For instance, Thomas Levin notes the long and complicated relationship between cinema and surveillance, suggesting its legacy in cinema's earliest forms:

since, no matter what else it is, Louis Lumière's 1895 *La Sortie des usines Lumière* is also the gaze of the boss/owner observing his workers as they leave their factory. Early cinema is replete with micro-dramas of surveillance in which people are followed and recorded using both visual (photographic/cinematic) and acoustic (gramophone) means.<sup>43</sup>

And, preceding histories of moving image, Dieter Kammerer reads nineteenth-century practices of sequential photography as evidence for the indebtedness of cinema's prehistory to scientific (and surveilling) pursuits of "self-control of human motions through image technology."<sup>44</sup>

Apparatuses for visual entertainment have rendered the human body visible, legible, textual, co-functioning to afford viewing and viewership. As Catherine Zimmer has argued regarding more recent filmic endeavor, "films about surveillance do both ideological and practical labor by joining the form and content of surveillance practice in a narrative structure."<sup>45</sup>

In a similar way, journalists covering the Bus Uncle phenomenon regarded it as training in a surveillant viewership, a mode of public social operation for cameraphone users. Of course,

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Levin, "Rhetoric of the Temporal Index: Surveillant Narration and the Cinema of 'Real Time,'" in *CTRL[SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. Thomas Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 578-593; 581.

<sup>44</sup> Dieter Kammerer, "Video Surveillance and Hollywood Movies," *Surveillance and Society* 2/2-3 (2004): 466.

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); 2.

image is not the only parameter of surveillance; histories of sonic-surveillance-as-entertainment exist as well. After all, while the journalistic reportage's likely reference for *Candid Camera* is the television show popular on the American network CBS through the 1990s, that show originated from Allen Funt's 1947 radio series "The Candid Microphone." The point of the series, Funt suggested, was to "create a program that would simply record the beauty of everyday conversation...pure eavesdropping."<sup>46</sup> In an analysis of Funt's various "Candid" endeavors, however, Fred Nadis suggests how this "eavesdropping" on the everyday mirrored Cold War America concerns of citizen virtue, conformity, and privacy—"Funt's entertainments quietly probed 1950s Americans for their 'good citizenship' qualities, creating a comic inversion of the HUAC hearings."<sup>47</sup>

Surveillant cameraphone videography, too, emerged into a context of the broader surveillant anxieties of its time. Proliferating networked devices and flows of information, increasingly available to everyday users, enabled the possibility of massive vernacular, as well as hierarchical, attention. While this was obvious to the journalists and commenters responding to the original Bus Uncle video, I further suggest that the use of vernacular musicalizing techniques—emerging in part from the audiovisual styles and formats of early internet viral musicking—not only helped normalize Internet behaviors of mass participatory surveillance, shaming, and mockery, but conscripted singular users into this practice directly, via catchy tunes and humorous, low-quality aesthetics.

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<sup>46</sup> Allen Funt and Philip Reed, *Candidly Allen Funt, a Million Smiles Later* (New York: Barricade Books, 1994), 26.

<sup>47</sup> Fred Nadis, "Citizen Funt: Surveillance as Cold War Entertainment," *Film & History* 37/2 (2007): 14.

The camera phone thus functioned as a very different kind of “ubiquitous listening” device, one potentially affiliated with techniques of corporate and civic surveillance, as well as with those of personalization of public space more commonly suggested for the Walkman, iPod, and mobile phone. That is, the cameraphone afforded its mid-2000s user the possibility to, at any time, capture the sonic and visual information of their everyday experience in a mediatized form that could then be inserted into a tangled assemblage of *other* media—stretching from the hyper mediated “broadcast” of YouTube, to the printed word and page of more traditional newspaper journalism—and imbricating the data of daily life into bizarre new forms of musical practice. But mass potential surveillance by cameraphone users is, as mentioned above, not precisely analogued through reference to an Orwellian “Big Brother,” an all-seeing, all-hearing governmental surveillance apparatus. Cameraphone use by everyday users was not undertaken in service of top-down disciplinary compulsion towards subscription to and participation in a particular state ideology. Instead, actants of users and their cameraphones rendered both public and private space as troves of audiovisual material—data—for potential capture, potential musicking, potential remediated circulation, catalyzing affective responses of humor, delight, or horror.<sup>48</sup> These affective responses could bolster existing social bonds (via private, intimate circulations among groups of friends), or could engender virality (via “broadcasting” on central public hosting platforms like YouTube).

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<sup>48</sup> The neutralizing and normalizing function I suggest here in the relationship between music, musicalizing, and surveillance operates in reverse, but in some analogous ways, to how Eric Drott has described streaming music’s co-option of music as a “technology of surveillance.” Musicalization in the examples I describe in this chapter, operates via ideologies of music’s positively-charged aesthetic and emotional modalities, as well as its triviality, its imagined aesthetic remove from the political or the real. As Drott illustrates, streaming music corporations across the 2010s leaned into ideologies of music’s close connection to emotionality and subjectivity, stressing music-as-data’s capacity to reveal user’s interiority *to themselves* (but, of course, also to advertisers). See Drott, “Music as a Technology of Surveillance,” *Journal for the Society for American Music*, 12/3 (2018): 233-267.

This reframing of surveillance accords with Philip Agre's theorized distinction between "surveillance" and "capture" as metaphors for the tracking of human behavior. "Surveillance," Agre notes, is largely framed in terms of visual and territorial metaphors ("watching" and "invasion" of the "private"), and functions towards a centralized system; "capture," on the other hand, is characterized by decentralized and heterogeneous organization—particular local practices involving people in workings of larger social formations.<sup>49</sup> In using cameraphones to render public space as audiovisual (potentially musicalizable) data, cameraphone-users contributed to a "capture" assemblage that would become increasingly pervasive across the 2000s and 2010s, via proliferating biopolitical systems for recording and parsing human behavior as monetizable datasets to be repurposed not for governmental control, but to the ends of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>50</sup>

### **Songified: Other Voices, Musicalized**

The "Bus Uncle" video and its remixed transformations can be understood as a broader set of manipulable "found footage" phenomena online. One adjacent set of such phenomena were videos of interviewees from news broadcasts, and other unscripted video media, excerpted, musicalized, and circulated as humorous viral spectacles. These subjects were frequently marked

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<sup>49</sup> Agre, "Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy," *The Information Society* 10 (1994): 101-127; 106.

<sup>50</sup> In formulating this theorization, Agre was slightly anticipating similar claims that Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson would make in their influential 2000 article "The Surveillant Assemblage." Offering similar critiques to the prevailing theories of Foucault that I suggest here—in particular, they draw on the work of Deleuze and Guattari to propose a rhizomatic "surveillant assemblage" that heterogeneously but exhaustively collects, records, and transduces the cyborg data corpuses of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century social dwellers. I suggest the implications of this surveillant assemblage (or, perhaps, to fuse with Agre, the capture assemblage) in my discussions of the attention economy and ubiquitous digital social media platforms in the dissertation's fourth chapter. See Haggerty and Ericson, "Surveillant Assemblage," *British Journal of Sociology* 51/4 (December 2000): 605-622.

by their race and class—especially popular were subjects marked as some combination of Black, lower class, female, feminized and/or queer. As modes of response to such video segments, techniques of musicalization were central to their re-contextualization and circulation as objects of amusement. Some of the most prominent figures in this mode or genre of viral musicking were individuals like Antoine Dodson, Kimberly “Sweet Brown” Wilkins, Diana Radcliffe, and Jimmy McMillan, all of whom had video footage of their image and speech remixed and circulated in musicalized viral video form between 2010 and 2012.

Of these figures, Antione Dodson served as the earliest and most prominent; the virally-circulated video of his news appearance served as a prototype for similar videos that would follow. Dodson, with his sister Kelly, was interviewed as part of a local news broadcast in Huntsville, Alabama on July 28, 2010, in the aftermath of a home invasion, in which an unidentified man had attempted to assault Kelly Dodson.<sup>51</sup> The news clip began with Kelly Dodson, frustratedly stating: “I was attacked by some idiot from out here in the projects.” Then Antione Dodson, wearing a black tank top and red du-rag, addressed his sister’s assailant, as well as the broader community:

Obviously, we have a rapist in Lincoln Park. He’s climbing in your windows, he’s snatching your people up. He’s trying to rape them, so y’all need to hide your kids, hide your wife... You don’t need to come and confess. We’re looking for you, we’re gonna find you. So you can run and tell that.

The news segment framed the interview with establishing shots of the family’s home, as well as images of the disheveled room and broken glass, remnants of the invasion.

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<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Gentle, “Woman Wakes Up to Find Intruder in her Bed,” *WAFF.com*, 28 July 2010. Accessed via Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100816192212/http://www.waff.com//Global//story.asp?S=12883477>. Accessed 2 January 2019.

Two days later, “BED INTRUDER SONG!!!” had been uploaded, and was acquiring views on YouTube.<sup>52</sup> [Figure 11] Less than a week later, the video had been viewed 2.2 million times; it amassed 13.5 million views over the span of a month. The video was created by white Brooklyn-based folk band and comedy music ensemble the Gregory Brothers, who had already developed both the technique for transmuting televised news broadcasts into musical data, and the audiovisual style for doing so. The group had been publishing videos that audiovisually remixed news footage since 2008, and since April of 2009 they had been regularly publishing a series on their YouTube channel called *Auto-Tune the News*.<sup>53</sup> In these videos, the Gregory Brothers scoured the recent news for musicalizable clips—evocative, strange, or noteworthy words or phrases, particularly memorable or musical contours, etc. They then remixed the chosen content into music using electronic editing software. In particular, they used the pitch-correction software Auto-Tune to make the speakers—newscasters, political figures, celebrities—sing.

The Auto-Tune software was developed in the 1990s by Andrew Hildebrand, who adapted a technology he had originally designed to be used for the petroleum industry.<sup>54</sup> Using Fourier transform to alter the frequency of digital signals, Auto-Tune functioned to align

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<sup>52</sup> schmoyoho, “BED INTRUDER SONG!!!,” *YouTube.com*, 30 July 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMtZfW2z9dw>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

<sup>53</sup> For copyright reasons, the series was later renamed *Songify the News*. See schmoyoho, “VP Debate in Song and Dance” as an early prototype for the model. The first official “Auto-Tune the News” video was posted on April 11, 2009. schmoyoho, “VP Debate in Song and Dance,” *YouTube.com* 3 October 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxGKlrS9SxE>. Accessed 12 February 2019; “march madness. economic woes. pentagon budget cuts.// Auto-Tune the News #1,” *YouTube.com*, 11 April 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bduQaCRkkg4>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Ethan Hein and Myles Jackson, “The Vocoder, Auto-Tune, Pitch Standardization, and Vocal Virtuosity,” Paper for History of Science and Technology, 27 October 2017. <http://www.ethanhein.com/wp/2017/the-vocoder-auto-tune-pitch-standardization-and-vocal-virtuosity/>. Accessed 2 February 2019. As Hein and Jackson note, both the vocoder and the Auto-Tune software emerged from the use of the Fourier transform for non-musical technological purposes: the vocoder in the United State military’s SIGSALY voice encryption system used in World War II, and Auto-tune from reflection seismology in the petroleum industry.

recorded or performed pitches to their “correct” pitch level, either in real time or production afterwards. While the technology was put to subtle use across a variety of music industry production in the 1990s and 2000s, it was also sometimes used *unsutbly*, as a deliberate, audible effect. Cher’s 1998 single “Believe” forwarded a distinctive, mainstream example of the tool’s cyborg capacities, and it was quickly put to broad, audible use across rap and hip-hop, becoming a sonic signature for the genre, especially linked to artists like T-Pain.<sup>55</sup>



Figure 11: The Gregory Brothers “BED INTRUDER SONG!!!” on YouTube, August 2010

<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the use of Auto-Tune became so closely sutured to T-Pain’s sonic and technological identity as a performer and producer that his acoustic performance on NPR’s *Tiny Desk* series in October 2014 was something of a viral sensation in its own right, fueled by rhetoric of “proof” of the artist’s capacities for “real musicianship”—presumably achieved through the medium of un-digitized singing. Catherine Provenzano includes a reading of this event in her chapter in the recent collected volume *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*. See Provenzano, “Auto-Tune, Labor, and the Pop Music Voice,” in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, edited by Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).



In remixing the news footage of the Dodsons to make “BED INTRUDER SONG!!!,” the Gregory Brothers used the software to digitally reshape Antoine and Kelly Dodson’s recorded speech into musical phrases, singable melodies. They foregrounded Antoine and isolated phrases from his speech to loop for comedic and musical effect: “Hide your kids, hide your wife,” “Run and tell that,” “Homeboy.” Along with a synth piano beat and trap percussion track, the creators added choral accompaniment to many of the repeated phrases, and the entire work was shaped into a standard pop verse-chorus structure; Kelly Dodson’s single line was relegated to a part of a verse. Visually, the video largely began by centering images of Antoine Dodson, then moved to intersperse images of the Dodsons’ home and invaded bedroom over the second “chorus.” Members of the Gregory Brothers superimposed themselves visually as well towards the song’s close, taking the place of newscasters, but dancing and attired in shutter shades.

After the song’s conclusion, over an outro of an R&B piano version of the “Bed Intruder” song performed by Evan Gregory, onscreen text invites viewers to make and post their own versions—a reference to a particular functionality of the YouTube platform at this time, a rectangular bar featuring “Video Responses.” This feature of the interface appeared below each video and afforded a particular kind of musical sociality: through linking their videos, users could participate in an explicit referential dialogue or parodic response, creating a closely-linked, easily viewable network of videos. A little more than a week after the Gregory Brothers’ posting of “BED INTRUDER SONG!!!” the video’s page was linked to nearly a hundred other versions, from ukulele covers to a Batman-themed version.

But it would be disingenuous to characterize this instance of viral musicking as a proliferation of collective amateur creativity. The members of the Gregory Brothers—Michael, Andrew, Evan, and Evan’s wife Sarah Fullen—were trained, gigging musicians, who owned and

used a wide spectrum of sound manipulation software and used it professionally. Thus *Auto-Tune the News*, “BED INTRUDER SONG!!!” and the Brothers’ other video output functioned in a space well outside of simple amateur or hobbyist production. Following the massive viral attention received by the video in August 2010, the Brothers placed an audio-only version of “Bed Intruder Song” on iTunes, where it sold more than 100,000 copies (and thereby entered the Billboard Hot 100 chart, as well as the iTunes Top 50 chart). In a journalistically-well-documented move, they split the profits with Antoine Dodson, who used the money to purchase a house.<sup>56</sup>

### **“Bed Intruder”: Some Repercussions**

In a chapter on the “Bed Intruder” phenomenon, Corella Di Fede aptly suggests that “while sampling and viral distribution underpinned the “Bed Intruder Song’s” success, their associated discourses paradoxically operated to evacuate the song/phenomenon’s political significations, particularly those related to race, class, and sexual violence.”<sup>57</sup> Forwarding Achille Mbembe’s topography of necropolitics as a frame, Di Fede argues that the “resource” extracted in the case of “Bed Intruder” was:

the discursive and visual imagery associated with the persona of Antione Dodson: first by the media, then via anonymous circulation as a meme, then by the Gregory Brothers, and finally by national news outlets and academics such as myself.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Kashmir Hill, “A Model for Viral Video Remix Profit-Sharing from the ‘Auto-Tune the News’ Musicmakers,” *Forbes.com*, 16 September 2010, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2010/09/16/a-model-for-viral-video-remix-profit-sharing-from-the-auto-tune-the-news-musicmakers/#368cbf5cb581>. Accessed 2 February 2019; Megan O’Neill, “‘Bed Intruder’ YouTube Song Earns Antoine Dodson a House,” *Adweek.com*, 21 September 2010. <https://www.adweek.com/digital/antoine-dodson-buys-house/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Corella Di Fede, “How the World is Being Remade: Antoine Dodson and the Limits of Sampling as Transcultural and Cross-Class Expression,” in *Sampling Media*, 212-225, edited by David Laderman and Laurel Westrup (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); 224.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Again, I agree with Di Fede's suggestion, pushing to add that it was not only "discourses" around "Bed Intruder" that served to evacuate its political realities—but that the musicality of remix, procedures of making musical, musicking, were all part of this process of emptying out. It was musicalizing that rendered figures' words, voices, and gestures as objects, rendered them consumable, especially by an assumed audience of normative white, middle-class, technologically-privileged viewer/listeners. Turning the voices of news broadcast subjects like Antoine and Kelly Dodson into technologized song established distance between subjects of the videos and participants in viral musicking. For participants, musicking afforded plausible deniability to the practice's cruelty, its implication and participation in oppression as spectacle, its proximity to historical practices of racialized ventriloquism and blackface minstrelsy.<sup>59</sup> Musicalization transformed Antoine and Kelly Dodson's experience of personal and community invasion, precarity, and trauma into a catchy jingle, a t-shirt, a Halloween costume. While Alexander Weheliye suggests ways in which vocoder use functioned in "R&B desiring and feenin machines" to "reticulate the human voice with intelligent machines," I argue the usage of voice-altering technology described above only functions as a weak, parodic index to the techniques of R&B.<sup>60</sup> Instead, the use of Auto-tune by the Gregory Brothers and other copycats across the late 2000s and early 2010s served to standardize acts and practices of objectification, flattening out voices and converting human subjects into pre-musical potentially-

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<sup>59</sup> Again, I suggest this formation's relationship to other audiovisual outgrowths of minstrelsy, similar to the modalities discussed in Chapter 1. This lineage stretches from animation and cartoons to communicative GIF usage in digital social media in the 2010s. See Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) and Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," *TeenVogue.com*, 2 August 2017. <http://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Weheliye, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* 71/20/2 (2002): 39.

viral data. Remediation, in this instance, served to both hypermediated the news broadcasts and to erase their mediation in music—but that erasure effected the rendering of Dodson and similar viral figures *as* media, as objects, as audiovisual aesthetic material, rather than as empathetic living subjects.

As with objects in the preceding chapter, the circulation of “Bed Intruder” as a musical text rendered it legible and appropriable for incorporation into high-profile professional media: the opening credits of the 2015 television show *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* humorously depict—and musicalize—just such an event taking place. In the first minutes of the show’s first episode, as the protagonist and her fellow abductees are pulled from the underground bunker where they’ve been held for fifteen years, the comedy format begins to remediate contemporary television news—cutting between center-screen reporters framed by explanatory chyrons. Over this “news footage,” the show’s soundtrack softly floats: a chorus of voices in a wordless “ah.” One reporter turns behind her to “a neighbor who watched all the drama unfold”—a black man, marked as lower class by his trailer and du-rag, marked as potentially-queer by his wrist movements, wide vocal timbre, and slight lisp. The character (identified as “Walter Bankston”) has barely finished his first phrase (“What had happened was”—again, diction chosen to specifically index lower-class Blackness) when his speaking voice begins to exhibit characteristic flattenings effected by Auto-Tune software. A repetitive electric guitar riff begins to loop; a clapped percussion track appears. The choir of the previous soundtrack joins in as hype women, singing back fragments of phrases. The “real” and “live” temporality of the “news broadcast” is disrupted as the visual track, too, begins to stutter and loop. The viewer is no longer

watching the remediated format of television news—now it is the *viral video* form itself that’s being remediated.<sup>61</sup>

In subsequent episodes and seasons, this evocation of viral video form and aesthetics would serve as the show’s theme song. The lyrics of the song are comprised of newly-composed “evocative” fragments that might have drawn a 2010s viewer to musicalize the news clip in the first place: “Unbreakable!” “They alive, dammit,” and “Females are strong as hell.” Again, the diction and pronunciation of the composed phrases suggest a southern, rural, uneducated utterer—in stark distinction to the crisp pronunciation and “neutral” accents of the show’s New York City-based main characters. (This is despite the fact that the titular character Kimmy Schmidt is canonically from Indiana, her voice and accent throughout the series bear no markers of rurality or lower-class status, even though other characters who are presented as her canonical kin or peer group *do* speak with such vocal markers, often for large-scale comic effect.) Additionally, the character of “Walter Bankston,” who was presented as the originator of the viral “content,” is largely rendered invisible, save for a brief clip of him windmilling his arms along with the phrase “It’s a miracle!” He is never presented again as a character in the show.

### **Postlude: Listening for Kelly Dodson**

In a piece for *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, Chanel Craft Tanner draws attention to the invisibility (and inaudibility) of the woman of color at the center of the crisis that precipitated

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<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the credits music was created in consultation between the show’s producers Tina Fey, Robert Carlock, and Jeff Richmond, and the Gregory Brothers, who were called in to reproduce their signature content style. See Katey Rich, “Why You Can’t Get the *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* Theme Song out of Your Head,” *VanityFair.com*, 10 March 2015. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/03/unbreakable-kimmy-schmidt-theme-song>. Accessed 12 February 2019.

Dodson's interview and the "Bed Intruder" sensation: Dodson's sister Kelly.<sup>62</sup> Tanner notes that the trait of invisibility "oscillates between power and protection," noting that while Kelly is decentered, unseen, and unheard, Antione is subjected to musicalized hypervisibility, "a caricature for public amusement."<sup>63</sup>

Tanner calls for a re-transformation of the phenomenon, noting not just the musical qualities of the original but their inhabiting capacities, their bodily effects:

I demand a remix to this remix! One whose beat doesn't influence your body to sway and your lips to smile as you sing the words. One that, instead, causes your body to curl over in pain and your eyes to water. One that makes you feel sad, or, better yet, angry that this happened. Can we remix this remix into a story that centers the Black woman who was attacked?<sup>64</sup>

Tanner then concludes her piece with a letter to Dodson's largely absent, largely voiceless sister:

Dear Kelly,

We know that in these conversations about this Internet sensation, YOU are missing. We know that when they're jamming to the music they aren't thinking about YOU. We know that you were never central, not in the original news story, not in the song, and not now. All of this has been about trivializing your brother's anger (characterizing as 'emotions running high' instead of emotions running normal for someone whose family member was attacked), the creativity of these White boys (a group that has always profited off the abuse of Black women), and the power and creative force of technology. Well the Crunk Feminist Collective says it's all about you... From this point on when we hear the 'Bed Intruder Song' we will force ourselves to center you, and we will think about where we stand in our anti violence movement. We will dedicate a moment of silence to making a safe world for women and girls like you and your daughter. We want to let you know that this is not okay and we are fed the fuck up.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Chanel Craft Tanner, "Antoine Dodson's Sister: On Invisibility as Violence," in *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, 249-251, Brittney C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, eds. (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2017).

<sup>63</sup> Tanner, 250.

<sup>64</sup> Tanner, 250.

<sup>65</sup> Tanner, 251.

## CHAPTER 3: REVILING, REMIXING, AND RECUPERATING “REBECCA BLACK – ‘FRIDAY’”

### Introduction: It’s Friday

On March 11, 2011, popular internet humor blog The Daily What published a post containing a YouTube video. The video’s static thumbnail evoked placid suburban domesticity—a medium close-up of a white adolescent girl smiling widely, framed against a background of green foliage. This post, with its innocuous image, seemingly suitable for advertising home insurance or back-to-school supplies, was inexplicably and provocatively captioned “Where Is Your God Now Of The Day: I am no longer looking forward to the weekend.”<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the Daily What posting, the video had received relatively little online viewership. By just a few weeks later, on March 30<sup>th</sup>, it had edged out Justin Bieber’s “Baby” to achieve the dubious distinction of the “most disliked” video on the YouTube platform.<sup>2</sup> The video in question is “Rebecca Black – Friday,” one of the most infamous viral videos of the early 2010s.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> @thedailywhat, “Where Is Your God Now of the Day,” *Tumblr*, 11 March 2011. <https://thedailywhat.tumblr.com/post/3786344046/where-is-your-god-now-of-the-day-i-am-no-longer>. Accessed 2 May 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Internet Archive captures of the two videos show that on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Justin Bieber’s “Baby” video had 1.165 million “dislikes,” while “Rebecca Black- Friday” had 1.192 million “dislikes.” It is worth noting that, while the number of “dislikes” on both videos were similar at that point, the ratios of views and “likes” to “dislikes” were quite unequal; Bieber’s video had received 500 million views and over 580 thousand “likes,” while “Friday” had received only 64 million views and 143 thousand “likes.” However, the discursive connecting of Bieber and Black will be discussed further below.

As an additional, curious note: a practice of Internet pilgrimage persisted years after the video’s viral explosion, in which viewers navigated to the video on YouTube to bestow their thumbsdown of “dislike.” A scan of the video’s comments in May 2017—six years after the video’s release—showed numerous recent commenters claiming to have done precisely that, despite the video having been out of mainstream viral circulation for many years.

<sup>3</sup> @trizzy66 (Patrice Wilson), “Rebecca Black - Friday (OFFICIAL VIDEO),” *YouTube.com*, 10 February 2011, Accessed via Internet Archive:

In the video, over the course of three minutes and forty-seven seconds, singer and central figure Rebecca Black narrates and moves through believably mundane situations—a schoolgirl eagerly anticipating the weekend as she completes her morning routine and commute, to a Friday night party full of friends. Throughout the song, she repeats a chorus that echoes the song’s titular day of the week:

It’s Friday, Friday, gotta get down on Friday,  
Everybody’s lookin’ forward to the weekend, weekend.  
Friday, Friday, gettin’ down on Friday  
Everybody’s lookin’ forward to the weekend.  
Partyin’, partyin’ (yeah!), partyin’, partyin’ (yeah!)  
Fun fun fun fun, lookin’ forward to the weekend.

The saturated, well-lit visuals, the (quasi-)professional effects, editing, and sound production, and its placement on the video platform YouTube marked this digital audiovisual text as a “music video.” As will be discussed below, all of these components—including the mundanity of the situation, banality of the lyrics, and Black’s visual appearance, movement, and vocal production—were targets of widespread bemusement, ridicule, and abuse, both in online spaces such as comment sections and forum boards, and across more authoritative entertainment and news media.

The viral explosion around “Friday” shares some resemblances with the preceding chapter’s “Bus Uncle” and “Bed Intruder” viral musickings—all owed their massive viewerships to the hosting functionalities of the YouTube platform, and to musicking practices of dialogic, networked remixing and sharing. “Friday,” too, moved through a hybrid media ecology of print

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20110315093849/https://youtube.com/watch?v=CD2LRROpph0>. Accessed 19 February 2019.



and television journalism, mainstream entertainment media, and online and offline sonic sharing and circulation. But where the “Bus Uncle,” “Bed Intruder” and similar phenomena were achieved through viral musicking accretions around non-(explicitly-)musical “found footage” audiovisual material, part of the problematic of “Friday” was its status as a seemingly legible already-musical media genre: the music video. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the massive negative response to “Friday” arose in part as the result of context collapse, as viewers consumed, interpreted, and reacted to a video whose intended audience was far different to the one assumed by those viewers. Additionally, the reactions to and reconfigurations of the “Friday” video dramatize *girlhood* as a problem in digital, pop culture, and music-generic space. The chapter begins by tracking some of the nodes and pathways through which the “Friday” video went viral in early 2011. I suggest how features of the video correlate and interconnect with a web of contemporary phenomena—in particular, digital microcelebrity, online bullying, and discourse surrounding the construction and policing of gender, sound and speech, both in popular music and online. Considering the distinct affordances of the YouTube platform in particular, I then investigate how such issues collided with the creation of “cover” and “response” videos—creations central to the viral practices surrounding “Friday.” These covers and their reception, I argue, re-shaped “Friday” as a circulating text, ultimately participating in the—perhaps ambivalent—rehabilitation of video, song, and performer, often by re-configuring its problematic signs of “girlhood” through more masculine markers of genre, voice, performance, and meaning.

### **Going Viral: From *Daily What* to *The New York Times***

To situate the video’s viral trajectory, I offer a brief timeline of events:

First, in late 2010, 13-year-old Rebecca Black recorded the music video “Friday” through Ark Music Factory, a production company specializing in creating low-budget studio recordings and videos for young, “undiscovered” aspiring musicians.<sup>4</sup> The video, titled “Rebecca Black – Friday” was posted in February of 2011 to the YouTube account @trizzy66, an account belonging to Patrice Wilson, one of the co-owners of Ark Music and the featured rapper on “Friday.”

A month of relative calm and obscurity ensued. Then, on March 11, 2011, the relatively popular content-aggregating Tumblr blog The Daily What posted the video, with the flippant caption “Where Is Your God Now of the Day” and the subtitle “I am no longer looking forward to the weekend.”

The Daily What post served as patient zero in the viral explosion of “Friday,” bringing the video to a much wider audience than it had received in the month prior; throughout the day on March 11, the YouTube video’s viewcount skyrocketed from the low thousands into the millions. While it is nearly impossible to trace the video’s path from that post, it is clear that news of the video (as well as the video itself) circulated through a variety of mediated nodes and spaces with extreme rapidity, aided by its posting on a number of key high-traffic sites. Some central sites for wide dissemination included the *Comedy Central* Tosh.0 blog and the forum aggregate Reddit.

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<sup>4</sup> In a casting call posted to [www.casting-call.us](http://www.casting-call.us), Ark Music Factory declared itself to be “searching for great talent out there. if you are a great singer without any material and you want to get discovered or you are an underground unsigned artist, then Ark Music Factory is looking for you.” The call sought male and female performers, aged 13 to 17. While the original call has since been deleted, an archival image can be accessed at [http://web.archive.org/web/20110316173355/http://www.casting-call.us:80/display\\_casting4.php?casting\\_id=895893&s=](http://web.archive.org/web/20110316173355/http://www.casting-call.us:80/display_casting4.php?casting_id=895893&s=).

In the late 2000s, the Tosh.0 blog functioned as an aggregator for viral internet content, functioning alongside the *Comedy Central* television show of the same name, on which comedian Daniel Tosh analyzed and ridiculed popular pieces of internet content.<sup>5</sup> Reporting on “Friday,” the Tosh.0 blog published a post entitled “Songwriting Isn’t For Everyone,” embedding the video and then adding an imagined dialogue between Rebecca Black and an unnamed producer:

Rebecca Black: Are you sure these are the lyrics you want me to sing?

Producer: What are you talking about?

Rebecca Black: This part where I just kinda slowly explain the ordering of the days of the week?

Producer: That’s the hook, baby! We breaking it down for the kids! They gonna know those days!!<sup>6</sup>

This dialogue acknowledges the assumed dynamic underpinning the creation of “Friday”: a pop producer dictating musical and textual material to an un-agentive pop singer. Implicit in this is a critique of the paternalistic stance of such producers towards young audiences, “kids” who “gonna know”—and who are presumed to be incapable of enjoying or consuming anything other than vapid, simplistic fare. The Tosh.0 blogpost credits the Daily What post as its originating source for the video. Similarly, and especially similar to the Daily What’s cryptic caption, the first Reddit post of the video—posted to the popular r/videos forum—offers nothing but a cruel, provocative title. “If this song doesn’t make you want to kill yourself-slash-others, nothing will,” the post crowed.

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<sup>5</sup> The *Tosh.0* show makes an interesting upending of the media models suggested in chapter 2, in which *Candid Camera* provided a naturalized prototype for the surveillance and capture of public everyday life via cameraphones, for humorous publication and circulation on the internet. Here, a television show takes that now-developed practice as its content.

<sup>6</sup> Mike Pomranz, “Songwriting Isnt For Everyone,” *Tosh.0 Blog*, 11 March 2011. Unavailable as an existing website, but accessible as an archived site at <https://archive.is/9ATz>.

Over the next several days came responses from amateur YouTube users and various YouTube and internet “microcelebrities.”<sup>7</sup> These took the form of “reaction” or “response” videos, mashups, re-dubs, and cover versions. It took a few days more for the video to reach the level of “news”; more traditional media outlets like *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Huffington Post*, *Good Morning America*, and *Rolling Stone* ran stories about the video and attendant phenomena.<sup>8</sup> While these outlets produced reporting on Rebecca Black and “Friday” within a week of its explosion via the Daily What post, coverage in *The New York Times* did not appear until March 21—this coverage took the form of a blog post on the *Times*’s parent-focused “Motherlode” site.

On March 30, “Rebecca Black - Friday” surpassed Justin Bieber’s “Baby” as the “most disliked” video on YouTube, having earned over 1.192 million dislike clicks on the platform (compared to the 1.165 million for “Baby”).

On June 16, the original “Friday” video was removed from YouTube, as a result of claims disputes between Black and Ark Music Factory.<sup>9</sup> It was not until September 16<sup>th</sup> that the

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<sup>7</sup> “Microcelebrity” is a term coined in Theresa Senft’s *Camgirls*, and built on broadly since in fandom and internet studies. See Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> See Nick Carbonne, “It’s Friiiiday: Let the Rebecca Black Media Blitz Begin,” *Time Newsfeed*, 18 March 2011. <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/03/18/its-friiiiday-let-the-rebecca-black-media-blitz-begin/?iid=sr-link9>; Joseph Brannigan Lynch, “Rebecca Black’s ‘Friday’: The Internet’s latest bizarre music video obsession,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 14 March 2011. <http://ew.com/article/2011/03/14/rebecca-black-friday-music-video/>; Pat Hronich, “Rebecca Black’s ‘Friday’ Becomes Internet Sensation (VIDEO),” *Huffington Post*, 14 March 2011. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/rebecca-blacks-friday\\_n\\_835495.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/rebecca-blacks-friday_n_835495.html); Matthew Perpetua, “Why Rebecca Black’s Much-Mocked Viral Hit ‘Friday’ Is Actually Good,” *Rolling Stone*, 15 March 2011. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/why-rebecca-blacks-much-mocked-viral-hit-friday-is-actually-good-20110315>.

<sup>9</sup> This point in the timeline presents quite an obstacle for historians of “Friday,” one familiar to researchers working on the internet: many early accounts of the video contain links to the now-deleted original. Additionally, all of that original video’s comments, as well as its accretion of likes and dislikes, have been deleted as well, and are accessible only in fragmentary form via platforms like Internet Archive.

video was re-uploaded to the site, this time to Rebecca Black's personal YouTube channel (@rebecca).<sup>10</sup> The re-uploaded video went on to become the fourth most-disliked video on YouTube.

The following chapter weaves this set of events into a broader network of issues of internet culture in early 2011. First, I closely read the "Friday" video alongside critiques and theorizations of it as "bad" music. Then, I connect the "Friday" video and its reception to trends and practices of online bullying and harassment, as well as to gendered assumptions and critiques of voice, youth, and pop music performance. Finally, I move to consider reception practices of a different—perhaps of a more creative, additive—nature: cover versions, remixes, and mashups, interrogating how these creations and their reception subverts or reinforces the critiques to which "Friday" was so widely and wildly subjected.

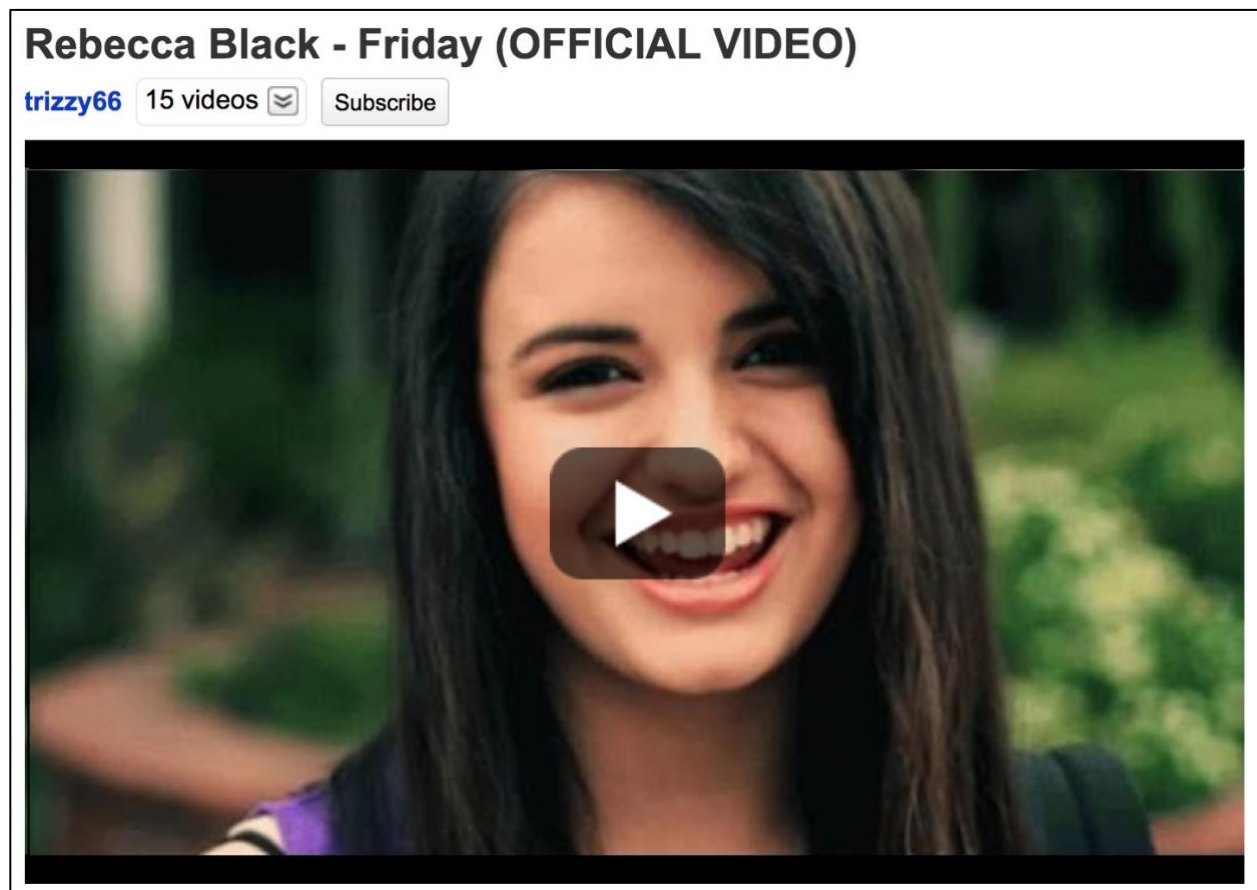
### **No Longer Looking Forward to The Weekend: "Friday" As Bad Music**

Tracing the "collapse" of the "Friday" video embroils one in both the aesthetics of the video and its circulation across and between various internet platforms. Many of the early initiating posts of the video—central high-traffic nodes like the ones mentioned in the timeline above—are shockingly light on specifics in their presentation of the video. They don't describe the video or bother to specify *why* what they're presenting is so repugnant, only making it clear, via provocative and seemingly hyperbolic language, that it is. The Daily What caption asks "Where is your god now of the day" and suggests that the original poster is no longer looking forward to the weekend; the Reddit post gestures to violence and self-harm, and the Tosh post

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<sup>10</sup> @rebecca, "Rebecca Black – Friday," *YouTube.com*, 16 September 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfVsfOSbJY0>. Accessed 19 February 2019; *Rebecca Black YouTube Channel*. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGPI7zCpQYpPhDLdOAmpAww>. Accessed 19 February 2019.

critiques the craftsmanship of an as-yet-unheard music video. Such heightened rhetoric might have been additionally confusing, at first glance, because of the appearance of the video as it was mediated across the various circulating platforms: a simple rectangular post, featuring a banal, unthreatening still image of a smiling, white adolescent girl. [Figure 12] This potent juxtaposition, between violent language and innocent image, was potentially compelling—to figure out exactly what was so horrible about the linked video, a user would have to watch it.



*Figure 12: Original “Rebecca Black – Friday” video on YouTube, March 2011*

From user responses in comment threads and fora, some justification for the enigmatic framing becomes clear: there’s no single reason why viewers and listeners found “Friday” terrible. Instead, there were a tangle of reasons, a proliferation of them. In the introduction to

Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno's edited volume *Bad Music*, the editors stress that "bad music" is a "social construct." They argue that:

[w]hat on the surface may appear to be minuscule gestures of random alliances (somebody switching radio stations, fast-forwarding CD tracks, or expressing distaste for a particular song, for instance)—or, in this case, pressing a the thumbs-down icon to "dislike" a YouTube video—"turn out to have a vitally important impact on our own sense of identity as well as on how we chose to present ourselves to the world. The very act of passing an aesthetic judgment assumes and bestows authority upon the judge. By explicitly disaffiliating ourselves with certain forms of musical expression, we make a claim for being "in the know" about things, we demonstrate an educated perspective and activate a wide range of underlying assumptions about what is "good."<sup>11</sup>

In *Bad Music*'s opening chapter, Simon Frith suggests that "there is no such *thing* as bad music. Music only becomes bad music in an evaluative context, as part of an argument." He posits that one typical meaning of musical "badness" is

*ridiculous* music, and the sense of the ridiculous lies in the gap between what performers/producers think that they are doing and what they actually achieve...Anthologies of bad music thus offer listeners tracks at which to laugh, to regard with affection, and above all about which to feel *knowing*; we, as listeners, understand this music—and what's wrong with it—in a way in which its producers do not.<sup>12</sup>

Viewers and listeners found *many* things to be "wrong" with "Friday." In fact, it is difficult to isolate just one feature or musical parameter that prompted the hyperbolic revulsion directed towards the video; the collective horror seemed to respond to a wide variety of its components. As a song, "Friday" is an Adornian checklist of boilerplate "standardized" pop music features and structures. It follows a clear 2000s-era pop song form: an 8-bar instrumental intro, then two iterations of a verse-prechorus-chorus complex, a rapped bridge, and a culminating two

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno, *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Frith, "What is Bad Music?" in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.

repetitions of the chorus. The song is in B major and never deviates from a standard I-vi-IV-V harmonic loop. The instruments are a similarly undifferentiated mixture of synths and hype vocal fills, whistles, and a perfunctory drum track.

The song's lyrics push mundanity to absurdist limits. The verses of "Friday" track events in a suburban adolescent's day: waking up, eating a bowl of cereal for breakfast, waiting for the school bus, then cruising down the highway, surrounded by friends, anticipating Friday night fun. (The precise nature of this "fun" is unspecified, though the second verse lyric assures the listener that "you know what it is.") The musical settings of these verses are similarly banal, largely stuck on the tonic pitch B, with just a few brief detours down to the leading tone, or up a third in the approach to the prechorus. Black delivers these near-flatline verses in a fast, low monotone, her voice pinging in a heavy, nasal timbre. The material of the chorus offers little by way of balancing complexity or musical interest; the numerous repetitions of the word "Friday" are set in a sing-song oscillation between d# and c#, before the chorus eventually circles back to the tonic pitch to close out with the line "Looking forward to the weekend."

This banality forming "Friday"'s base layer helps to shift the song's more awkward features into even sharper relief. The song's text setting is often ungainly, shunting syllables into perversely accented positions, such that the third syllable of "cereal" receives metrical stress ("Gotta have my **bowl**/Gotta **have** cereal"), as does the "ward" of "forward" in the second line of the song's chorus. Then, there are the moments when the lyrics surpass traditionally-maligned pop-music meaninglessness and enter into the territory of the absurd: the chronological listing of the days of the week in the song's bridge, the nonsensical repetition of words like "Friday," "fun," "weekend," and even "we."



A central point of contention and ridicule was Black's voice itself: her pronunciation and delivery, her timbre and its alteration by audible use of pitch-correction software. Joseph Lynch, reviewing "Friday" for *Entertainment Weekly*, noted that "She also has a particular way with delivery, making the word 'Friday' sound like 'fried egg.' And considering the song is called 'Friday,' this means you're in for a lot of fried-egg talk."<sup>13</sup> This mimicry was taken up with gusto by commenters and forum posters as well, who invented a variety of alternate spellings of the titular weekday to index Black's pronunciation. "**FRYADAY FRYADAY**" shouted one Reddit user's comment;

45 seconds. And then I had to read the comments saying there was a middle aged rapper involved, so I went back in.  
Fraiday, fraiday, fraiday, fraiday...  
I'd puncture my eardrums if it wasn't already stuck in my head.  
I think the rapper may be the "producer" (Aka the guy with the laptop and ableton studio).<sup>14</sup>

This latter Reddit comment, much like the *Entertainment Weekly* and other articles, nimbly leaps between a number of perceived faults (the Reddit comment, in particular, assumes an audience of readers who have also watched the video, and who will recognize his references to it). The Reddit comment also draws attention to another recurring target of confusion and critique: the presence of Patrice Wilson in the video's rap bridge. The mismatch of Wilson—a middle-aged

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Brannigan Lynch, "Rebecca Black's 'Friday': The Internet's latest bizarre music video obsession," *Entertainment Weekly*, 14 March 2011. <http://ew.com/article/2011/03/14/rebecca-black-friday-music-video/>.

<sup>14</sup> user deleted, comment on moose09876, "If this song doesn't make you want to kill yourself / others, nothing will." *Reddit*. Posted 11 March 2011, 17:21:10. [https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if\\_this\\_song\\_doesnt\\_make\\_you\\_want\\_to\\_kill/](https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if_this_song_doesnt_make_you_want_to_kill/). Accessed 30 April 2017; Tephlon, comment on moose09876, "If this song doesn't make you want to kill yourself / others, nothing will." *Reddit*. Posted 11 March 2011, 17:21:10. [https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if\\_this\\_song\\_doesnt\\_make\\_you\\_want\\_to\\_kill/](https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if_this_song_doesnt_make_you_want_to_kill/). Accessed 30 April 2017.

black man—to the sanitized, white, suburban, tween girl environment established in the rest of the video suggested ruptures along multiple lines of race, gender, age, class, and genre.

Everything about the rap was read as an intrusion into the video—some commenters decried what was perceived as a laughably superficial attempt to elevate the song’s “cool” factor through the inclusion of a rap (and of a black man, understood visually as the authentic voice and body to perform and bring that “cool”), while others responded to Wilson’s presence in the video along well-rehearsed lines of panic regarding black male threat to white (young) female safety and virtue. Commenters referred to Wilson as a potential predator, pointing out the clear disparity in age between Wilson and Black.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, commenters familiar with the reporting on Wilson as Ark Music Factory co-owner cast him as the perpetrator of other real-life forms of predation, construing the entire Ark Music Factory enterprise as part of a system designed to ensnare and hoodwink naive and aspirational youth seeking an entryway into the music and entertainment industries.

In addition to the mismatch of sound and image embodied in the division between Wilson’s explicit presence and the rest of the video’s elements, some of the vitriol for “Friday” was directed towards its visuals, and to interactions of the music and cinematographic planes.

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<sup>15</sup> One Reddit commenter wove a multi-referential narrative to this effect:

“Looks like there is a sonic tsunami coming our way from the Ark Music Factory. The guy in the car in this song seems to have found enough cubits of wood to avoid the floods in Japan and has managed to take all of the 14 year old girls who want to be superstars into his safe haven to ride out the storm.

I remember an episode of *Criminal Minds* where this exact same scenario played out. You heard it here first.”

The reference to the tsunami indexes a real and devastating natural disaster which had struck Japan on March 11, 2011. The commenter connects this to a cult-like religiosity through the pun on Ark, and suggests (via the reference to *Criminal Minds*, a police procedural television show) a sinister pedophilic hoax preying on the aspirations of young would-be singers.

The quality of these parameters obviously surpassed an amateur YouTube “bedroom” aesthetic, or the grainy cameraphone footage from the preceding chapter’s “Bus Uncle.” The visuals were richly colored and crisp, clearly the product of professional lighting and editing. But despite this quality, some elements still stood out for their “wrong”ness, cheesiness, or visible artifice: the opening animated graphics and sequence of an calendar “flip-book,” the obvious use of green screen in the second verse.

James Macdowell and James Zborowski, discussing aesthetic evaluations of what they term “badfilm”—cult films deemed to be “so bad they’re good”—invoke Eco’s notion of the “intention of the text”: the “result of a conjecture on the part of the reader.”<sup>16</sup> In establishing how to encounter and consume a text, a reader effectively guesses or bets on its intended meaning, based on context. Similar to Macdowell and Zborowski’s “badfilms,” the reception of “Friday” depended on a multi-layered set of interpretations stemming from an interpretation of failure, in terms of its genre, form, or context. “Friday” was interpreted by many of its viewers as a music video—in particular, as a *failed* music video—and various ensuing interpretations of the video’s badness (and so-bad-it’s-good-ness), as well as its wide dissemination and the compulsion of viewers to share it, sprung in part from this problem of contextual failure. In the case of the “Friday” video, the “bet” of a viewer, that “Friday” constituted a professionally-produced music video, was underpinned by a number of features of the video that suggested that particular context.

### **“They Didn’t See Me as a Person”: Context Collapse and Online Hate**

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<sup>16</sup> James MacDowell and James Zborowski, “The Aesthetics of ‘So Bad It’s Good’: Value, Intention, and The Room,” *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media* 6 (2013): 8.

One well-documented facet of the “Friday” story was how the video and its performers were subject to immediate, broad, and diverse campaigns of vitriol, ridicule, and abuse. The titles of the early posts referenced above, from Reddit, Tosh.0 and others, show some indications of the popular negative stance towards the video—though those examples barely scratch the surface of the violence of some of the reactions, which often contained threats of suicide or violence (including sexual violence) against the video’s participants. Rebecca Black herself received such overwhelming, heinous, and alarming abuse—both online and in the “real world”—that she dropped out of high school in favor of being home-schooled, and occasionally involved the FBI in cases of stalking and threats of violence, rape, and death.<sup>17</sup> Far from being an outlier case, such a narrative was already deeply familiar to researchers of the internet and social media. Indeed, as early as 1999, Susan Herring suggested how pervasive practices of gender-based harassment in computer-mediated communication conformed to coherent “rhetorics of harassment” that “invoke[d] libertarian principles of freedom of expression, constructing women’s resistance as ‘censorship’—a strategy that ultimately succeeds, [Herring proposes], because of the ideological dominance of (male-gendered) libertarian norms of interaction on the Internet.”<sup>18</sup> In her study, Herring suggested two modes of this linguistic harassment: one “adolescent/recreational” mode of “crude, direct, and sexually explicit,” and one “older/academic” in which “gender harassment is typically rationalized by—and masked beneath—an intellectual veneer.” However, Herring notes, “when the rhetorical dynamics of the

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<sup>17</sup> An accounting of Black’s struggles receives an entire chapter in Paula Todd’s 2014 *Extreme Mean: Trolls, Bullies and Predators Online*. In this volume, the backlash against “Friday” is framed alongside other narratives of digital actions’ real-life impacts in violence and trauma: stories of teens driven to suicide by social media-enabled bullying, and accounts of the victims of “revenge porn” videos and databases. See Todd, *Extreme Mean: Trolls, Bullies and Predators Online* (Toronto: Signal, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Susan Herring, “The Rhetorical Dynamics of Gender Harassment On-Line,” *The Information Society* 15/3 (1999): 152.

two episodes are explicitly compared, the adolescent crudeness and the intellectual rationalizations emerge as alternative strategies for achieving the same end: limiting the scope of female participation in order to preserve male control and protect male interests.”<sup>19</sup> While Herring’s study focused on explicit harassment via language, I suggest that responses to Rebecca Black and the “Friday” video operated at only a slight level of remove, using Black’s voice and performance in the song as (white) female-coded musical stand-ins that could be similarly ridiculed through a dual-layered rhetoric of both crude and “learned” assault. In spaces like Reddit forum threads and YouTube comment sections, the crude modality prevailed—listeners threatening responses of violence (often sexual violence) against themselves, Black, or others. In the second mode of response—often taking place in journalistic media or from other more authoritative vantages—critiques of the failure and the banality of the song indexed gendered critiques of popular music more broadly, often coalescing around Black’s (white) girlish voice as a particular site for derision.<sup>20</sup>

In an interview I conducted with Rebecca Black in 2017, she described the post-“Friday” period to me—the months, even years after the video’s release—as a “blur.”<sup>21</sup> “They didn’t see me as a person” Black stated in our discussion. Indeed, especially among early comments, like Kingsley’s reaction video mentioned below, it’s easy to trace a recurring refrain of “is this real?”

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> William Cheng has recently discussed the way in which Britney Spears’s voice featured in isomorphic relation with her body as the site of problematic, heavily-derided “leaks.” Cheng suggests ways in which Spears’s whiteness, specifically discursive affiliations with “white trash” helped frame media associations between the star’s perceived vocal, occupational, and personal failings. While Spears is not a significant figure in the constellation of pop singers often referenced (derogatorily) alongside Black, that I mention below, the patterns of negative response to her work—theorized by both Cheng and Pecknold, below—form important recent precursors to the response to Black and “Friday.” See Cheng, “So You’ve Been Musically Shamed,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 30/3 (2018): 63-98.

<sup>21</sup> Phone interview with Rebecca Black, 4 May 2017.

“Is this a joke?” Commenters responded to Black as a perceived knowing actor in a larger piece of—failed—performance art or marketing gimmick. Or they assumed a “seriousness” of the video, holding it against standards of big-budget music industry videos. Those who’d discovered and researched Ark Music Factory came to more specific (albeit unsubstantiated) conclusions: Black was a “rich kid” whose parents had paid for the video as a vanity project—a birthday or bat mitzvah present.<sup>22</sup>

In our discussion, Black presented the video’s origins somewhat differently – as an aspiring singer, actor, and musical theater performer, she had booked the Ark Music Factory session in order to get experience in a studio, the equivalent to a line on her performing resume; it was something to show to future, more legitimate producers and industry personnel, *not* the general public. “There was no idea of an audience,” Black told me in our interview. And yet, from March 11<sup>th</sup>, the video had indeed begun to reach an audience far broader in scope than Black or the video’s other creators had anticipated or intended. This affordance of the social, searchable, identity-linked internet – in which a creator of content might expect, create, and post content for one set of consumers, while accidentally reaching a very different audience with widely different assumptions and expectations—is a phenomenon termed “context collapse,” a

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<sup>22</sup> On the comments of the initial Reddit post featuring the video, commenter TheDataWhore wrote:

“The entire channel [trizzy66] is like that:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/trizzy66>

My only guess is that this is a company that charges parents of rich girls shit tons of money to make ‘professional’ music videos to make their little girl think she’s going to be famous.”

TheDataWhore, comment on moose09876, “If this song doesn’t make you want to kill yourself / others, nothing will.” *Reddit*. Posted 11 March 2011, 17:21:10. [https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if\\_this\\_song\\_doesnt\\_make\\_you\\_want\\_to\\_kill/](https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if_this_song_doesnt_make_you_want_to_kill/). Accessed 30 April 2017.

concept credited to the work of sociologists and media theorists danah boyd, Alice Marwick, and Michael Wesch.<sup>23</sup>

Thus far, I have suggested ways in which the video was (mis)read by internet viewer/listeners as “for real,” as an imagined rival to other massively-produced spectacles by Lady Gage, Beyoncé, and others populating the YouTube platform. Part of what enabled this misunderstanding was the YouTube platform’s relationship to music videos as a media form at precisely that time, circa 2011. The launch of VEVO in 2009, and its subsequent close partnership with YouTube, meant that YouTube developed an understood status as the platform which hosted “legitimate” music videos, generally demarcated from amateur content by clear markers of production quality, both audible and visible. Additionally, hate for Black emerged not just in response to the poor quality of her song and video, but to anxieties surrounding the understanding of YouTube as part of an emerging pathway to—particularly musical—stardom. In what follows, I suggest close and pernicious connections between these anxieties and patterns of derision surrounding girlhood and youth, female vocality, and popular music more broadly.

In her book *Haters*, Bailey Poland explicitly connects the policing and denigration of gendered speech and vocal patterns with the belittling and exclusion of online female voicedness, citing “vocal fry” and “uptalk” as vocal traits associated with women<sup>24</sup> that are considered both evidence of the banality and unseriousness of female expression, and as “problems” to be overcome before a woman can be rendered audible—for example, in a professional context like a

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<sup>23</sup> See Alice Marwick and danah boyd, “I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience,” *New Media & Society* 13/1 (2011): 114-133; Michael Wesch, “YouTube and You: Experiences of Self-Awareness in the Context Collapse of the Recording Webcam,” *EME* (2009): 19-34.

<sup>24</sup> Though studies show that men frequently employ these techniques as well. See Amanda Ritchart and Amalia Arvaniti, “The Form and Use of Uptalk in Southern Californian English,” in *Proceedings of Speech Prosody* vol. 7, 20-23 (Dublin: Trinity College Dublin, 2014); 22.

workplace.<sup>25</sup> Of course, issues of voicedness and gender aren't just metaphorical when accounting for the negative online reception of "Friday" and the affiliated harassment of Rebecca Black. As mentioned above, Black's voice was one of the key points of focus for scorn and revilement. While few disparaging internet commenters made explicit connections between perceived issues of *her* voice and traditional sites of contention over *speech* traits associated with young women, Diane Pecknold has shown that the oft-derided "new girl voice" epitomized by performers like Britney Spears and Ke\$ha purposefully "indexed the shortcomings specifically associated with teen girls' voice change." Pecknold reads phenomena like vocal fry and breathiness as trained and specifically-produced effects meant to index girlish bodily imperfection, an aesthetic arising across the late 1990s and 2000s in mainstream American pop.<sup>26</sup> Under this rubric, mechanical means of vocal adjustment, like Auto-Tune, were both necessary and anathema; female voices were produced to a breathy, throaty standard, but for an audience to hear the means of that production (as so many "Friday" critics bemoaned they could) would undercut the desired "naturalness" and "innocence" of girlhood being effected. As Catherine Provenzano has recently suggested in her work on timbre and Auto-Tune, perceptible use of the technology opens up otherwise invisible (or inaudible) strata of musical work and manipulation, disrupting easy imaginings of voice as "authentic": "Auto-Tune is an uncomfortable hybrid of skilled and automated labor that upsets the way we expect to experience the human through

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<sup>25</sup> Bailey Poland, *Haters: Harassment, Abuse, and Violence Online* (Lincoln: Potomac, 2016), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Diane Pecknold, "'These Stupid Little Sounds in her Voice': Valuing and Vilifying the New Girl Voice," in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music*, 87-108, Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2017).



singing.”<sup>27</sup> In particular, across the 2000s, the Auto-Tune technology often discursively functioned as metonymy for the interventions of otherwise-concealed music industry machinations, especially underpinning mainstream (female-voiced) pop.

Following from this tenuous technologized vocal position, it is no coincidence that Black was most frequently derisively compared to a small number of contemporary performers: Justin Bieber and Ke\$ha. The linkage of Black with these musicians—Bieber in particular—was reiterated numerous times across forum and comment boards:<sup>28</sup>

The song sounds like the dumbest response possible to Kesha and Bieber. Seriously, it shares such an insane amount of stuff from songs like Tik Tok and Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby, OOOOOHHH, Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby, I can’t take any claim that they didn’t specifically try to emulate the success of these songs seriously.<sup>29</sup>

I never knew Saturday came after Friday! And Sunday comes afterwards?! Thank you, Justin Bieber in a wig.<sup>30</sup>

Issues of feminized vocality are latent here; Justin Bieber was widely reviled in the early 2010s for his light, high, “girly” voice, and Ke\$ha’s then-recent smash hit “Tik Tok” had sutured her

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<sup>27</sup> Catherine Provenzano, “Auto-Tune, Labor, and the Pop-Music Voice,” in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, edited by Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 175.

<sup>28</sup> Other frequently-affiliated artists are The Black Eyed Peas and Rihanna. Rihanna generally appears in the specific context of her song “Umbrella,” in which the repetition of the syllables “ella-ella-ella” is seen to prefigure “fun fun fun” or the listing of the days of the week in lyrical and sonic gestures seen as meaningless and stupid.

<sup>29</sup> Superjuden, comment on moose09876, “If this song doesn’t make you want to kill yourself / others, nothing will.” *Reddit*. Posted 11 March 2011, 17:21:10. [https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if\\_this\\_song\\_doesnt\\_make\\_you\\_want\\_to\\_kill/](https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if_this_song_doesnt_make_you_want_to_kill/). Accessed 30 April 2017.

<sup>30</sup> SatoriIxnay, comment on moose09876, “If this song doesn’t make you want to kill yourself / others, nothing will.” *Reddit*. Posted 11 March 2011, 17:21:10. [https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if\\_this\\_song\\_doesnt\\_make\\_you\\_want\\_to\\_kill/](https://www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/g21pa/if_this_song_doesnt_make_you_want_to_kill/). Accessed 30 April 2017.

party-girl image to her throaty, fry-filled talk-singing vocals and audible use of pitch-correction software. Discursively yoked to the two of them, the thirteen-year-old Black is illuminated as a figure at the crux of significant slippage in twenty-first-century popular culture: girlhood. Rather than the promiscuous, empty-headed party girl embodied in the Ke\$ha of Tik Tok, Black was portrayed in “Friday” as entirely innocent. Situated in the murkily-constructed space of childhood, Black moves through the video’s sanitized, de-sexualized spaces of an innocent bedroom (popping with bright colors), to a suburban neighborhood, to a party— but a wholesome one filled with fully-clothed youths dancing in “safe,” unsexualized bounces and shoulder shimmies.<sup>31</sup> In this portrayal, she was more contiguous to the 2011 figure of Bieber, who had only recently emerged as a prodigious star performer, and who was being marketed as a “tween”—in what Tyler Bickford describes as a dialectic of maturity and innocence, in which the trappings of adulthood are rendered innocent or “appropriate for consumption” by children and youths (who are themselves understood to be consumers).<sup>32</sup> Bickford notes that the category of “tween” is “generally coded as white and feminine,” and members of this category operate under a “logic of vulnerability.”<sup>33</sup> However, the reception of Black and “Friday” suggest how easily a slippage might occur between childhood and adulthood, and how readily consumers of “Friday” understood the 13-year-old Black as an adult professional performer, a peer to Ke\$ha

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<sup>31</sup> Tyler Bickford, “The New ‘Tween’ Music Industry: The Disney Channel, Kidz Bop and an Emerging Childhood Counterpublic,” *Popular Music* 31/3 (2012): 417-436.

<sup>32</sup> Bickford, “The New ‘Tween’ Music Industry,” 431. See also Bickford, “Justin Bieber, YouTube, and New Media Celebrity: The Tween Prodigy at Home and Online,” in *Musical Prodigies: Interpretations from Psychology, Education, Musicology, and Ethnomusicology*, 749-764, Gary E. McPherson, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Bickford, “The New ‘Tween’ Music Industry,” 430.

(at the time, 24), Lady Gaga (25), or other established pop performers, and thus an acceptable target of massive quantities of online scrutiny, harassment, and vilification.

The invocations of Justin Bieber in relationship to Black suggest an additional entanglement with the threads of the emerging, deeply feminized “tween” music industry: the idea of digital platforms like YouTube as sites for the “discovery” of new artists, who could then be seemingly-instantaneously catapulted to fame. Indeed, the hagiography of Bieber’s felicitous discovery by producer Scooter Braun, coupled with the pervasive understanding (and dismissal) of Bieber’s fanbase as hysterical young girls, inspired sizable responses of resentment and backlash. Much like the audible use of Auto-Tune opened up a chasm through which could be seen the workings of nonhuman and non-performer pop production agency, the rise of Bieber as a star through YouTube platform suggested a music industry fame-making process both arbitrary and clogged with mimics. Thus, to critics, the timbre and production of Black’s voice and the formulaicism of her song marked her as a “dumb” “pop” girl; the platform on which her video inadvertently exploded situated her as a grasping imitator.

### **And Remix Comes Afterwards: Response Videos and Cover Versions**

While vitriolic commenting comprised one mode of digitally engaging with “Friday,” I argue that other modes of participation and response helped effect an affective shift around the video, song, and central performer. Acts of what Jean Burgess has theorized as “vernacular creativity” remixed “Friday” into new participatory media texts, made possible by various YouTube platform affordances.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, these texts participated in an affective

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<sup>34</sup> Jean Burgess, “Vernacular Creativity and New Media,” PhD diss, Queensland University of Technology, 2007. See also Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

recuperation of the video, made possible through audiovisual transformations that shifted and “solved” the problems of girlhood, voice, and genre read through the “Friday” video.

Central to the phenomenon of “Friday”—to its wide spread and its circulation in American popular culture and media—were the creation and consumption video responses on YouTube, fostered in part by particular and emerging affordances in the YouTube platform. One such affordance, YouTube’s “Recommended Videos” feature, had been implemented a few months prior to the release of “Friday.” Envisioned as “key method for information retrieval and content discovery in today’s information-rich environment” and designed to “allow users facing a huge amount of information to navigate that information in an efficient and satisfying way” (according to YouTube), the “Recommended Videos” functionality meant that a “Friday” viewer would have been offered a selection of additional recommended videos on the webpage displaying “Friday,” shown in a horizontal bar above or next to the chosen video. These recommended videos would have been algorithmically selected because of “co-viewed” relationships *to* “Friday” video, as well as—to a lesser extent—the viewer’s own previous viewing and engagement behavior on other YouTube videos.<sup>35</sup> The implementation of such a feature meant that “Friday” existed in an ecosystem of visual and digital relations to other audiovisual material.<sup>36</sup> Videos “Recommended” alongside “Friday” might have included other ARK Music Factory creations uploaded to Patrice Wilson’s channel @trizzy66, like Lexi St.

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<sup>35</sup> See Davidson et al., “The YouTube Video Recommendation System,” Proceedings of *RecSys2010*, September 26-30, 2010, Barcelona, Spain: 293-296.

<sup>36</sup> This being the case, much of YouTube’s traffic was still driven by and linked to direct searches within the platform. Because of the search and retrieval functionality of the platform in early 2011, creators of referential YouTube videos (like cover versions and response videos) often included the full title of the referenced video in the title of their response or remix. This manifests in many of the video titles for “Friday” responses, which frequently include the “Rebecca Black - Friday” title within a longer title (e.g., “Rebecca Black - Friday [DUBSTEP Remix]”). Though somewhat ungainly, this textual matching made the videos more likely to be listed in algorithmically-selected search results and Related Videos listings.

George's "Dancing to the Rhythm" or Britt Rutter's "Without Your Love"; such linkages enabled viewers to stumble quickly into a rabbit hole of similarly-befuddling texts to "Friday," featuring young children, banal or bizarre situations, audible use of vocal correction software, and relatively high production values.<sup>37</sup> Other recommendations included videos made and published as direct responses to the "Friday" video by other YouTube users—these included humorous commentary, covers, or mashups.

The phenomenon of "response videos" or "reaction videos," in which users could create and upload a video in response to a previously-uploaded video, directly linking their response to the pre-existing original, predated the "Recommended Videos" functionality by several years.<sup>38</sup> However, Heather Warren-Crow locates 2011 as precisely the point at which the genre of the reaction video "went mainstream," spurred in part by the publication of an article in *The New York Times Magazine* that documented the phenomenon.<sup>39</sup> Warren-Crow reads reaction videos as coded female, embedding performances that deploy vocality as a mechanism to convey authentic (mediated) affect:

[t]he soundscapes of reaction videos are testaments to the power of the voice when language proves insufficient: laughs of various timbres, haptic sobs, quavering screeches. In their stark foregrounding of voice over speech and body over words, feminized *phone*

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<sup>37</sup> @trizzy66, "Lexi St. George Music Video 'Dancing to the Rhythm'," published 29 June 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UCdcW0RgII>; @trizzy66, "Britt Rutter-Without Your Love," *YouTube*, Published 26 November 2010. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsiRwvGQn\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsiRwvGQn_M).

Recommended videos also could have included "Thank God It's Friday" by Love & Kisses—a humorous algorithmic accident seeming to assume that a viewer might be interested in songs based on that certain day of the week.

<sup>38</sup> This functionality would go on to be jettisoned by the YouTube platform in 2013. See "So Long, Video Responses... Next Up: Better Ways to Connect," *YouTube Creators Blog*, 27 August 2013. <https://youtube-creators.googleblog.com/2013/08/so-long-video-responsesnext-up-better.html>. Accessed 9 March 2019.

<sup>39</sup> See Sam Anderson, "Watching People Watching People." *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 November 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/magazine/reactionvideos.html>. Accessed September 26, 2016.

over masculinized *sematike*, these reactions are gendered, regardless of the sex of the participants.<sup>40</sup>

However, while this interpretation provocatively situates a particular—and popular—variety of reaction video, in which video subjects vocalize affectively while consuming a particular piece of media, such a framing does not entirely fit the majority of videos that were posted as explicit “reactions” to “Rebecca Black - Friday.” Many such videos took the form of reviews or rants, in which video subjects articulated their (largely negative) opinions of various parameters of the “Friday” video, fusing together performances of passionate affect with those of sarcastic or provocative speech. In Elisabetta Adami’s study of YouTube response videos, she views the creation and posting of such videos as multimodal communicative acts, in which “[c]ommunication hinges on a differentiated-and-attuned participation, which takes up and transforms the initiator’s text in a new performance.”<sup>41</sup> Performers of speech-based reaction videos participated in the phenomenon of Rebecca Black’s “Friday” by offering up new texts that could themselves be shared, with the YouTube performers’ wit, scathing sarcasm, or hyperbolic outrage standing in for or articulating the sentiments of the viewer, and ready for dissemination through the same mediated channels as “Friday” itself was being circulated.

On March 13, 2011, just two days after the explosion of “Friday” views following the Daily What post, YouTube user @kingsley posted a video entitled “OVEREXPOSED: REBECCA BLACK,” in which he listed a number of complaints about the video and its star.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Warren-Crow, “Screaming Like a Girl: Viral Video and the Work of Reaction,” *Feminist Media Studies* 16/6 (2016): 1113.

<sup>41</sup> Adami, “What I Can (Re)Make Out of It: Incoherence, Non-cohesion, and Re-interpretation in YouTube Video Responses,” in *Participation in Public and Social Media Interactions*, Marta Dynel and Jan Chovanec, eds. (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2015), 242.

<sup>42</sup> @Kingsley, “OVEREXPOSED: REBECCA BLACK” *YouTube*, Published 13 March 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJ9XIP6XNXs>. Accessed 20 April 2017.

The video is what Patricia G. Lange calls a “video of affinity,” in which Kingsley, already a YouTube microcelebrity, addresses his understood audience—jaded teen internet culture consumers.<sup>43</sup> Seated in front of his computer’s webcam and wearing his trademark furry trapper hat, Kingsley opined:

I don’t know if she has a record deal. I don’t know if this video is a spoof, or I don’t know if it’s serious, but I’m acting like it’s serious, because she seems to be so fucking full of herself, and the fact that it’s Friday, that I’m just gonna just talk about her.<sup>44</sup>

The video includes seemingly-spontaneous reactions to the situations of the music video; Kingsley mixes critique of the banal lyrics and diegetically-absurd situations with critiques of aspects of the video’s production, such as the sloppy use of green screen and audibly-perceptible Auto-Tune. Kingsley closes his reaction video by wishing: “next Friday I hope her car falls into a fucking body of water and that she can’t open the door.” He amends with a “Just kidding, I’m not that mean,” and then, looping around again, adds “But she’s still a stupid bitch.” Such strong language and unapologetically-negative reactions fit Kingsley’s YouTube celebrity “brand”; Kingsley himself had been featured on Tosh.0 in December 2010 for his breakout video “Things I Hate.”

Such video responses kept “Friday” circulating in the YouTube ecosystem through individual and linked networks of the platform’s vernacular tastemakers. Another critical participatory practice in the viral spread of “Friday”—an unambiguous instance of viral musicking—was user-created cover versions of the original video, which re-composed or altered

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<sup>43</sup> See Patricia G. Lange, “Videos of Affinity on YouTube,” in *The Youtube Reader*, 228-247, Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds. (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> @Kingsley, “OVEREXPOSED.”

the original's lyrical, musical, and sonic content.<sup>45</sup> These videos were interpreted as a constitutive component of the viral circulation of "Friday"; media coverage in the wake of "Friday" tended to treat the constellation of related videos as a given in the process of a viral video's emergence.

### Covering "Friday"

Among the wide and irreverent variety of responses to "Friday," several comprised clear and conscious musical re-imaginings, fitting Theodore Gracyk's definition of "cover" as consisting of an "illocutionary act of constructing an interpretation" of a familiar original, conveying a particular attitude or critique to a knowing audience, via the song as medium.<sup>46</sup> Users covering "Friday" assume an audience already painfully familiar with a hated original. Many of the "Friday" covers that garnered the most attention—in terms of views, YouTube "likes," and inclusion into various media compilations—fall under Michael Rings's definition of "generic resetting" or "genre-reset" covers: those that "[present] a song in a genre different from

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<sup>45</sup> This remixing can be understood as an extension—and refinement—of the practices described around the "Bus Uncle" phenomenon in Chapter 2. Due to advancements in easily-available audio and video editing and production software, the "Friday" cover versions read, on the whole, as significantly more "highly-produced" and less "amateur" than those surrounding the "Bus Uncle" video in 2006, while advances in the sophistication of YouTube's search and recommendation protocols, as well as increasing user savvy in responding to such protocols, led to "Friday" cover versions and responses being more explicitly linked to the original through metadata and other paratextual means.

<sup>46</sup> Theodore Gracyk, "Covers and Communicative Intentions," *The Journal of Music and Meaning*, 11 (2012/2013): 22-46; 24.

See also Kurt Mosser, who characterizes covers in terms of Wittgensteinian "family" relationships. Such a theorization might be quite useful to the kinds of constellations of texts that tended to emerge in response to a viral video at this time. Mosser, "'Cover Songs': Ambiguity, Multivalence, Polysemy," *Popular Musicology Online* 2 (2008): <http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/issues/02/mosser.html>.



that of the original.”<sup>47</sup> Rings suggests that such genre-resetting might “generate a more hermeneutic brand of interest by providing an intertextual dimension that may serve to enrich a listener’s interpretative engagement with the song.” The cover videos discussed below suggest precisely this kind of novel interpretive engagement, reconfiguring the pop failure of “Friday” into success.

Pecknold forwards “Friday” as a text that is emblematic of the status of girlhood more broadly—perpetually in flux, resisting subjectification, particularly in the medium of the voice. The multiple versions and reworkings of the song, Pecknold suggests, “attested to the eagerness with which listeners seized on Black’s voice as a tool for reconfiguring their own histories, identities and personae.”<sup>48</sup> While Pecknold’s assertion might have been true in some cases, I would push against a wholly optimistic reading in the covers and strategies I discuss below. Rather than reconfiguring “Friday” for the expression of fluid or novel identities, the popular covers re-set “Friday” in genres that themselves are often defined oppositionally *to* pop, often framing that opposition explicitly or implicitly in gendered terms, against femininity and girlhood. Even further, I argue that these “re-sets” only “solve” the song’s greatest “problem” of girlishness and pop-ness—Rebecca Black’s voice—by erasing or replacing it with male vocals.

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<sup>47</sup> Michael Rings, “Doing It Their Way: Rock Covers, Genre, and Appreciation,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71/1 (2013): 55.

Online media publications like Mashable and Buzzed published lists of notable covers of “Friday” as part of their accounting for and participating in the “Friday” phenomenon. See Stan Schroeder, “Top 5 Rebecca Black ‘Friday’ Covers,” *Mashable* 16 March 2011, <http://mashable.com/2011/03/16/rebecca-black-friday-covers/#4w5jdHIJtkqW>. Accessed 11 February 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Pecknold, ““These Stupid Little Sounds in her Voice,”” 91.

In a video entitled “Rebecca Black – Friday [DUBSTEP Remix],” four screenshots from the original video are arranged in static panes across the video’s expanse.<sup>49</sup> A wash of additional percussion overlays the original musical track, the tempo of which is significantly increased. Layers of more articulated percussion are added incrementally through the first verse and pre-chorus, until, as Black’s voice is stuttered and looped as a pulsing beat on her syllable “take,” the remix reaches a climax—and drops. The video’s posted description provides an onomatopoeic rendering of what follows, textually rendering the wobbly distortions and stutters characteristic of the genre:

ITS FRiday...WHUABWHUABWHUABWHUABW-HUABWHUAB

FUN FU-FU-FU-FU-FU....WHUAAAAAAMMM-...NYA NYA NYA

GOTTA HAVE MY BOWL

GOTTA..WHUABWHUABWHUABWHUABWHU-ABWHUAB

FRIDDDD - WHUAAAAAAMMM...NYA NYA NYA

FUN FUN FU FU FU FU FU - WHUAM WHUAM

WHUAWHUAWHUAWHUAWHUA WHUAM WHUAM

WHUAWHUAWHUAWHUAWHUA

Black’s much-maligned voice is largely rendered unrecognizable, shifted into a vastly lower register. At times, snippets of the un-transformed original are audible, but these fade further into the background as the remix progresses, setting the rap bridge and second verse before slowing and fading out.

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<sup>49</sup> @Toxin08, “Rebecca Black - Friday [DUBSTEP Remix],” *YouTube*, uploaded 15 March 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExmNN3jj6WM#1:20>. Accessed 1 May 2017.

The video “Death Metal Friday” sets itself up as a joke in a slightly different way.<sup>50</sup> Though the video’s title gives a strong indication of what a viewer/listener might expect, the video itself begins in confusing familiarity, with the first seventeen seconds of the original “Friday” video and song presented unaltered—a viewer might be prompted to do a double-take, to make sure she hadn’t clicked on the original by accident. The cheesy synths and vocal fills of the introduction roll over the top of the animated flip-book calendar highlighting the days of the week, the shot dissolves into a frame of Black’s bedside alarm clock, then pans to Black, who opens her eyes—and BAM.

Instead of Black’s nasal, girly patter, the soundtrack explodes into the characteristic timbral world of death metal: distorted guitars, heavy percussion playing driving rhythms, and a vocal line delivered in a deep masculine scream. The lyrics remain unchanged; “7am waking up in the morning/Gotta be fresh gotta go downstairs” the voice screams, even as it still seems to emerge from Black’s onscreen mouth. Indeed, the lyrics and their rhythms being kept intact allows for this additional element of the cover video’s ironic success—while the *sound* of “Friday” is altered in a dramatic and surprising fashion at the seventeen-second mark, the original *visuals* of the video are kept entirely intact throughout the death metal cover. The screaming vocals and other dramatic genre-based shifts enacted on the musical world of the song-layer are highlighted—and made somewhat ridiculous—by the maintenance of the placid suburban setting so fitting to the mundanity and childishness of the original. The disparity functions as easy, humorous critique—perhaps even a double critique of the stance of death metal to pop music, and the over-seriousness of the former genre. Nonetheless, the girlish

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<sup>50</sup> @dannydodgeofficial, “Death Metal Friday,” *YouTube.com*, Uploaded 19 March 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pi00yRg\\_5c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pi00yRg_5c). Accessed 1 May 2017.

onscreen body of Black is violently superimposed with a fundamentally dissonant “vocalic body”—that of an angry white man.<sup>51</sup>

A third version of “Friday” circulating on YouTube in March 2011 purported to be a performance by legendary folk artist Bob Dylan.<sup>52</sup> Titled “Rebecca Black – Friday, as performed by Bob Dylan,” the version is facetiously presented as the “original” version of “Friday”; the video’s caption describes reads “The source of Rebecca Black’s hit single “Friday” is revealed in this lost recording from Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes.” Instead of any moving images, the video is set to a static picture of a vinyl album label, printed with a variety of markers of faux authenticity: “Friday” in bold at the label’s base, the Columbia records logo wrapping around the top, Dylan’s name stamped several times, and a mark on the label’s right side cites the publisher as “Big Sky Music,” Dylan’s own publishing endeavor through which he produced and licensed his own music until 1969. The imagery of the vinyl album label on the video is its own signifier as well, playfully linking the video to a network of similar “archival” or “deep dive” vinyl cuts uploaded to and circulating on YouTube by that time, which were often visually identified (and authenticated) in this way, by the visual display of their stickers.

Musically, the Bob Dylan cover artist performs the lyrics of “Friday” largely intact, with only minor rearrangement, especially in the less “narrative” parts of the song. He mimics Dylan’s characteristic raspy talk-sing, accompanying himself with a strummed acoustic guitar. For the chorus, “Dylan” sings a plaintive, drawn-out variation on the original melody, switching back to speech for a wry “Partyin’ partyin’ yeah!” In these major genre-reset covers, the

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<sup>51</sup> See Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> @HeyMikeBauer, “Rebecca Black - Friday, as performed by Bob Dylan,” *YouTube.com*, uploaded 13 Mar 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FISHEO3gsM>. Accessed 2 May 2017.

technologized voice clearly remains a central issue. Notably, while the dub remix performs a hypertechnologizing of Black's original vocals, amplifying the perceived falsity of her pitch-corrected performance (re-setting them in a genre *marked* by virtuosic performance of technologized sound and timbral production), the other two genre re-sets effect the opposite. Both metal and folk—in the iterations parodied in these covered—rely on the virtuosic performance of highly artful “failure,” or resistance to aesthetic norms of vocal beauty or perfection. The rasp in the faux-Dylan folky talk sing, the grating scream of the metal cover are heightened sites of performative “authenticity” in their respective genres—a direct contradiction the perceived pop inauthenticity, the duplicity in Black's audibly Auto-Tuned voice.

### **Do Read the (Cover) Comments**

The feed of comments posted below each of these parody cover versions on YouTube constituted small ecosystems of genre contention and participatory meaning-making. Discussions and themes in these comments showcased concerns particular to the audiences of each genre. In the dub and death metal cover feeds, commenters highlighted features of the covers that effected successful participation in the genre in question—the intensity of the dub drop, or the rawness and variety of vocal performance in the death metal version. Many comments jubilantly played up the new meanings afforded by the covers' manipulations of the much-maligned original. Several different commenters on the death metal cover screamed in all-caps:

SATAN IN THE FRONT SEAT  
SATAN IN THE BACK SEAT

These comments played on the decreased audibility of the lyric “Kickin’ in the front seat/Sittin’ in the back seat” in the vocal distortion of the death metal cover, as well as suggesting (somewhat farcically) a more genre-plausible version of the lyric. Additionally, much of the

commenting activity beneath “Death Metal Friday” fell into predictable fan behavior for that genre: negotiations and hashings-out of genre and subgenre boundaries and characteristics.

Numerous comments across the videos commended the cover creators for vastly improving on the “Friday” original; a common addendum to this theme was to note that the creator had in fact made a quality song for the genre—not *just* an amusing reference. Interestingly, though, many of these commendations celebrated covers that had retained significant aspects of the original song quite closely, from sounds, to lyrics, to harmony and form. The shared strategy across these “successful” in-genre creations was to *masculinize* “Friday” in various ways—but particularly through the obscuring or erasure of Black’s voice, the assertion of a male “vocalic body” in ironic juxtaposition to Black’s very visible onscreen girlhood. In fact, the comments of the Dylan parody tended to make this replacement explicit. In the comment section below this particular video, perhaps riffing off of the original poster’s facetious indices of “authenticity,” commenters began weaving complicated historical narratives of the “real” Dylan “original” which Rebecca Black had “ripped off” in her 2011 pop “version”: “Ms Black’s version is perhaps the most serious misinterpretation of a Dylan song since the Byrds,” commenter DoctorBohr wrote.<sup>53</sup> Other commenters discussed having sung the “original” during Vietnam protests, or having heard Dylan perform it live in long-past concerts. In a telling vein of this commentary, viewers found that the Dylan-esque declamation of the once-banal lyrics now made them dense with poetic meaning. While it might be easy to write off this mode of commentary as a simple extension of the original historical hoax conceit, I argue that the Dylan comments nonetheless reveal—if only accidentally—intersections of sound, voice, and

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<sup>53</sup> @DoctorBohr, comment on @HeyMikeBauer, “Rebecca Black - Friday, as performed by Bob Dylan,” uploaded 13 Mar 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FISHEO3gsM>. Accessed 2 May 2017.

interpretations of genre that were deterministic of meaning-making potential. In the raspy voice of a folk singer, a listener might be primed to hear depth in “Gotta have my bowl/gotta have cereal”; when uttered from the throat of a girl, he might not be.

Taken as a whole, the commentary on the covers tended to valorize strategic removal and erasure of negatively-marked pop and girlhood—negating or “solving” the intertwined “problems” of Black’s gender and youth, as linked to and manifested in the sound and genre of “Friday.”<sup>54</sup> And this was not limited to amateur commentary or vernacular creative productions. A final set of “Friday” re-interpretations demonstrates an even more high-profile deployment of this strategy—“solving” or “improving” “Friday” through the erasure of white girlhood and its replacement with white masculinity—as an additional component of the 2011 viral ecosystem: near-immediate re-mediation of viral texts in the service of re-directing viral attention to mainstream media entities. By just a few months after the explosion of “Friday,” its fame and pervasiveness had been leveraged into a spectacular charity stunt for late night television, and a sequence on the hit television show *Glee*. Both performances featured white male performers singing the much-maligned song.

In the first performance, comedy talk show host Stephen Colbert provided the central re-helming. On March 28th, Colbert delivered a televised promise to perform the song on fellow comedy host Jimmy Fallon’s *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* show the following Friday, should viewers raise \$26,000 to donate to charity Donors Choose—a microfunding platform largely

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<sup>54</sup> For scholarship regarding the negotiation, erasure, or disintegration of female identity in the performance of metal, see Ben Hutcherson and Ross Haenfler. “Musical Genre as a Gendered Process: Authenticity in Extreme Metal,” *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 35 (2010): 101-121; Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

used to fund and support teachers.<sup>55</sup> By the following Friday (April 1<sup>st</sup>), viewers had indeed raised the money, and Colbert put on a performance of the song that could only be read as ridiculous in its exuberance: in consecutive reveals, Colbert's performance was supplemented with accompaniment by The Legendary Roots Crew, vocal and harmonica additions of recent *American Idol* winner Taylor Hicks, and a choreographed routine by the New York Knicks City Dancers. The number—and the evening's show—ended with a barrage of confetti erupting from the ceiling, and a fadeout over an exhausted Colbert and Fallon, still chanting a seemingly endless chorus of “fun fun fun fun”s.

A month later, the hit 2010s television show *Glee* also featured the song in a spectacular context. The show, centered around the exploits and teen drama of a high school glee club, featured a wide variety of highly-produced musical numbers as part of its central conceit. In the episode “Prom Queen” from the show's second season, tuxedoed characters Artie, Puck, and Sam (played by actors Kevin McHale, Mark Salling, and Chord Overstreet) perform the song as the opening number at the high school's prom. This performance of “Friday” did little to alter the generic trappings of the song, other than changing the gender of its performers; buzzy synthesizers index the original, and the boosted percussion layer is combined with an added clapped percussion track that resonates aurally with the enthusiastic dancing, clapping, fist-pumping students shown responding to the boys' performance. This track is presented in earnest: an address to an audience inclined towards “Friday” as more than an object of loathing and site of aural pain. Indeed, like much of the rest of the music performed on the show, a cast recording of the track was made available for purchase as a digital download, and was included on the

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<sup>55</sup> See Matthew Perpetua, “Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Fallon Perform Rebecca Black's ‘Friday’,” *Rolling Stone*, 4 April 2011. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/stephen-colbert-and-jimmy-fallon-perform-rebecca-blacks-friday-20110404>. Accessed 24 April 2017.



2012 album *Glee: The Music - The Complete Season Two*—an album which ultimately sold more than a half million copies.

Such adaptations were heralded by some as a recuperation of “Friday”—making “good” of “bad” music; Matthew Perpetua’s *Rolling Stone* piece praised the high-spectacle late night cover as “glorious and joyful,” lauding the “celebratory” nature of the performance. Perpetua explicitly contrasted this with the on- and off-line bullying heaped upon and endured by Black in the video’s initial viral waves.<sup>56</sup> This notion—that cover versions redeemed and elevated the original—had in fact been in play almost all along. In the initial *Entertainment Weekly* reportage on “Friday,” Joseph Lynch addressed the already-proliferating vernacular creativity:

There are already remixes and covers a’plenty of this pop-music aberration, such as the inevitable chipmunk version and a freshly-recorded “Bob Dylan” cover. There’s also a minimalist, Steve Reich-esque remix of Rebecca repeating the words ‘fun fun fun’ for two minutes without interruption.

But instead of driving you away from the original, the reworked versions actually keep you going back to it. In the end, perhaps “Friday” is an example of warped accidental genius. Or at least that’s what you tell yourself after listening to this robotic, idiotic party anthem for three days straight.<sup>57</sup>

Versions in which Black is replaced by Dylan or re-composed into Reich are “genius”; the version with Black herself is a “robotic, idiotic party anthem.” Similarly, high-budget media industry productions of “Friday” on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* and the hit FOX television show *Glee* might be thought of as “interpreting” or “critiquing” the original “Friday” text by offering its “correct” trappings – a host of attractive actors *pretending* to be high schoolers, a troupe of highly-trained dancers, professional singers backed up by meticulous, virtuosic (and

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<sup>56</sup> Perpetua, “Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Fallon Perform Rebecca Black’s ‘Friday’.”

<sup>57</sup> Brannigan Lynch, “Rebecca Black’s ‘Friday’: The Internet’s Latest Bizarre Music Video Obsession.”

“inaudible”) producers and sound mixers. But again, a uniting feature in the “corrections” is the voice and (vocalic) bodies of white masculinity.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

Since 2011, Black herself has leveraged the “Friday” phenomenon’s ambivalent success for her own benefit, developing a space for herself within the reifying and corporatizing structures of professional YouTube creators, releasing more (and more professionally-produced music), and publicly pursuing charity work to fight online bullying. In a contrasting model from those outlined above, Black appeared in a rehabilitative role *within* a high-profile pop-genre context, in a featured (visual, though not vocal) role in the music video for Katy Perry’s summer 2011 hit “Last Friday Night.”<sup>59</sup> [Figure 13]

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<sup>58</sup> A further use of “Friday” not mentioned here was deployed by department store Kohl’s in November of 2011: a “Black Friday” parody of the song to advertise their day-after-Thanksgiving holiday sales. This parody kept the white, female, suburban vocality intact, featuring a central actress who could have conceivably read as Black’s older self. This choice worked, I would argue, precisely to coalesce (and lightly satirize) connotations of triviality, frivolousness, and girlishness with the characteristics of an ideal mass-consumption-holiday participant. The Kohl’s ad at once addressed this demographic, and could easily be read as mocking them, in part through the *retention* of a white “girlish” voice and its associations: a PopCrush piece on the campaign characterized the ad’s white brunette protagonist as a “zealous shopper (who has a little crazy in her eyes).” See Amy Sciarretto, “Rebecca Black’s ‘Friday’ Gets Reworked for Kohl’s Black Friday Ad,” *PopCrush*, 21 November 2011, <http://popcrush.com/rebecca-black-friday-reworked-kohl-black-friday-ad/>. Accessed 19 February 2019.

<sup>59</sup> See @KatyPerryVEVO, “Katy Perry - Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.) (Official),” *YouTube.com*, published 12 Jun 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlyXNRsk4A>. Accessed 20 April 2017.

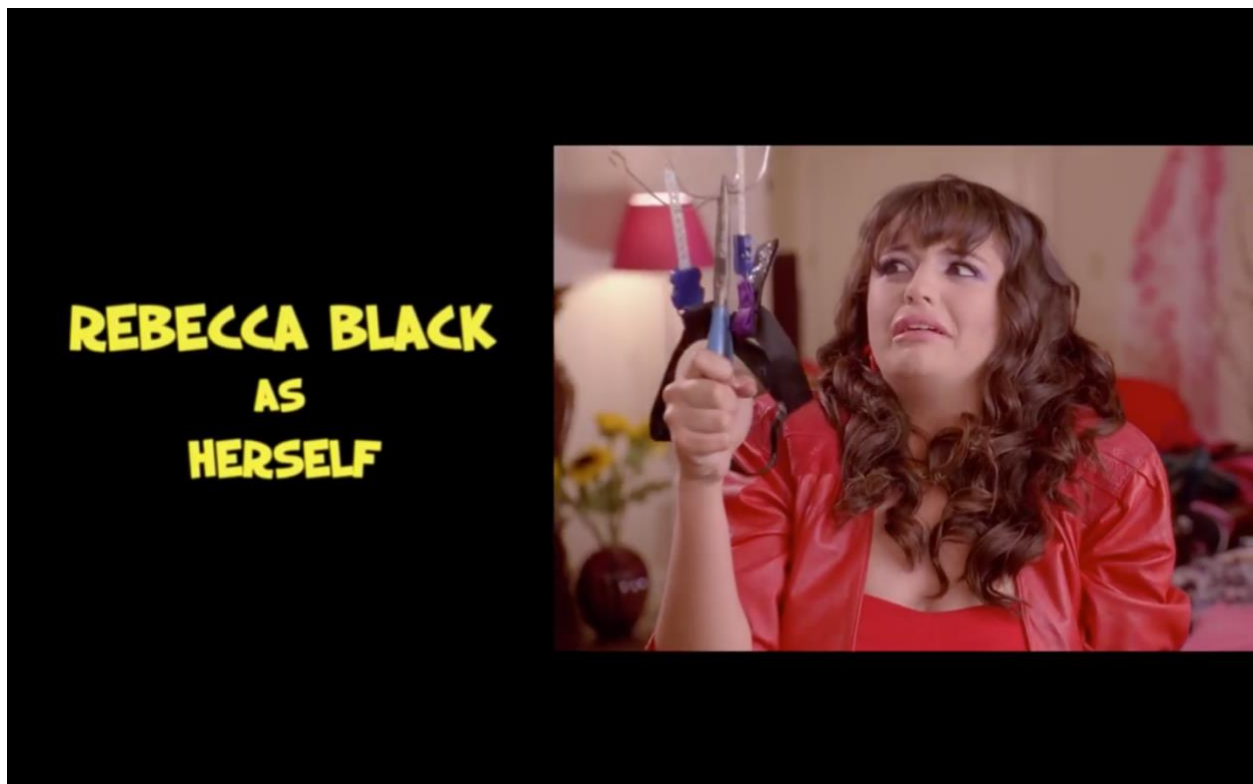


Figure 13: Still from the music video for Katy Perry's 2011 single "Last Friday Night," featuring Rebecca Black

Additionally, in a music video entitled "Saturday," published collaboratively in 2013 by Black and fellow YouTube performer Dave Days, Black explicitly confronts, appropriates, and re-envisions her most notorious text.<sup>60</sup> The video's title attests to the ambivalence of "Friday" in internet space and viral history (as well as Black's own history)—and the video, music, and lyrics are dense with references to that original. One might applaud Black for turning a new calendar page, leveraging her unintentional infamy to build strong and advantageous ties within the community of YouTube performers, while still hearing the cringe-inducing echo of "tomorrow is Saturday/and Sunday comes afterwards."<sup>61</sup> During our interview, however, Black

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<sup>60</sup> @rebecca (Rebecca Black), "Rebecca Black & Dave Days - Saturday," *YouTube*, Published on Dec 7 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVCzdpagXOQ>. Accessed 24 February 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the original video's racial dynamics are quite problematically—even traumatically—reimagined in the "Saturday" remix. As in the original, the party scenes are predominantly filled with the dancing,

somewhat bemusedly acknowledged, “people say I’ll never make anything as *good* as ‘Friday’ again.”<sup>62</sup>

In analyzing the reception of “Friday” across variegated media landscapes, from internet forums and video comment sections to newspapers and television broadcasts, the question of “good” and “bad” music has been inextricably tied to evaluative notions of genre—which themselves are inextricable from markers of gender, youth, race, vocality, and accessibility. Furthermore, these questions have been negotiated not simply by discourse, but by vernacular creative practices of remix and mashup—and the platforms and digital functionalities that afford them.

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partying bodies of white teenagers. At the song’s close, following a stripped-down bridge section and triumphant, layered final chorus, the accompaniment and vocals abruptly cut. Onscreen a black teenage boy, shout-singing lyrics from the original “Friday,” bursts through the door of the music video’s house party setting, and is abruptly pulled back out by a middle-aged white police officer with a “C’mon, let’s go junior.” Within the video’s heavily referential context, the boy might easily be read as a “removal” of the force of producer Patrice Wilson from both the song and Black’s life—but the choice to illustrate this removal through the literal policing of a young black man has chilling resonances with the realities of police brutality and racist violence that spurred the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, and that would erupt around the killing of Michael Brown only a few months after the publication of the “Saturday” video.

<sup>62</sup> Phone interview with Rebecca Black, 4 May 2017.

## CHAPTER 4: “UNMUTE THIS”: A VERNACULAR MICROGENRE IN THE PLATFORM ASSEMBLAGE

### Introduction: omg unmute

I am about to scroll past the video when I am halted by the caption: “omg unmute this.”

Perhaps the video featured relatively banal imagery, or perhaps it was utterly bizarre. Maybe I had watched a large portion of it already, with the sound off, as it autplayed from its rectangular spot on my feed. Either way, the caption gives me pause, and I am forced to make a decision: do I heed the caption, or ignore it? Do I turn the sound on?

The above hypothetical moment—an encounter with what I will term an “Unmute This” video post—might seem like an innocuous, banal encounter. In this chapter, I argue instead, however, that this particular intersection of behavior, devices and content functions as an entry point into a number of broader networks of issues within twenty-first-century audio-visual media and participatory behavior. First, this moment elucidates a reframing of the digital sensorium: how ears and eyes, watching and listening, are configured and reconfigured in tandem with ubiquitous devices like smartphones and earbuds, and via the affordances and behaviors of various digital and social media platforms. Second, directives to “Unmute This” point to a distinct mode of online social interaction, a particular “sociality” of social media. In collaboration with the devices and platforms of their everyday experience, users build a vernacular theory of media use based on their own behaviors and practices. They then implement that theory while seeking to impart an ideal content experience for others, platform users potentially far removed from the poster/commenter’s own acquaintances.

In this chapter, then, I begin by unpacking the implementation of autoplaying video and the assemblage of the ubiquitous digital sensorium—that is, what sensory behaviors and practices map on to dealing with autoplaying video, at least as suggested by “Unmute This” directives. I then consider “Unmute This” videos as a genre, sketching out some patterns in the form and content of videos that one might be most likely directed to “UNMUTE IMMEDIATELY,” and interrogating how such stylistic and formal details might be emergent in response to platform affordances, ubiquitous devices and norms of internet-mediated sociality. Finally, I suggest a theorization of vernacular media theory, drawn from the particulars of “Unmute This” videos and their creators and disseminators, and I unpack some implications for the kinds of assumptions about sociality, behavior and trust that are built into such theorizing and user responses *to* it.

This chapter marks a chronological diversion, in that many of the objects I regard here as case studies circulated between 2014 and 2016, *after* the 2013 Beyoncé album release discussed in the chapter that follows this one. Indeed, the “Unmute This” constellation in this chapter is in part *predicated* on the widespread adoption of the autoplay video format, which was being implemented alongside the Beyoncé album’s release—as I will mention in the following final chapter, Beyoncé is one of the celebrities who Facebook partnered with to roll out the autoplay functionality. The series of behind-the-scenes videos that I analyze in the following chapter were published—autoplaying—on Facebook as part of that campaign.

I make this unintuitive chronological deviation for a few reasons. First, my analysis of “Unmute This” practices highlights a dialectic of vernacular and corporate negotiations of behavior and experience—how the social- and community-focused behavior of individual users responds to corporate protocols, and how those behaviors are subsequently coopted for their

perceived authenticity, their capacity for capturing attention. Such negotiations, effecting particular technicities of digital perceiving and participating, are similar to those that necessarily underpinned the Beyoncé surprise release in the next chapter. Additionally, this chronological diversion provides a space to discuss the assemblage of interwoven modular platforms that had arisen by the middle of the 2010s. These ubiquitous, mutually-absorptive platforms facilitated ease of sharing, ease of folding together, coopting mechanisms from one to another in efforts to most effectively capture and retain users' seeing and hearing, their attention, as transmutable monetizable commodities (saleable data, advertising revenue). While many of the most prominent platforms did not explicitly or exclusively host, curate, or play music, the convergence and all-consuming enclosure of mid-2010s social media platforms meant that those platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Tumblr in the United States) functioned nonetheless as key sites for the publication and sharing of musical (or quasi- or proto-musical) content—sound files, videos, GIFs.

### **Audio-Visual Autoplay: A Short, Contentious History**

A Facebook press release, issued on September 12, 2013, announced initial tests of “an easier way to watch videos on Facebook.”<sup>1</sup> “Now,” the release apprised, “when you see a video in News Feed, it comes to life and starts playing.” The automatic enlivening of these videos occurred in only one parameter, however—moving image, not sound. The Facebook release also stressed the limited scope of intended participants in the sharing of such videos; users, performers and musicians would be creating and posting videos, but *advertisers* would *not* be.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Mayes, “An Easier Way to Watch Video,” *Facebook Newsroom*, 12 September 2013. <http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2013/09/an-easier-way-to-watch-video/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

The Facebook press release touted this limitation as a means of fostering “the best possible experience” for its (noncorporate) users. However, it acknowledged that “over time, we’ll continue to explore how to bring this to marketers in the future.” Of course, over time, this is precisely what happened—the introduction of autoplaying video through its palatable, even appealing use by popular performers and members of Facebook’s users’ social circles functioned as habituation for an ideal advertising format. By 2015, Facebook’s rebranding of autoplaying video was a success. A piece from media trade blog *Digiday* declared “Like it or not: autoplay video won,” citing Facebook’s implementation as the vanguard for the adoption of various video autoplay functionalities across a number of other platforms, including Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.<sup>2</sup> The spread of the autoplay functionality provoked novel kinds of user behavior in response and ultimately engendered the formation of new audio-visual artifacts, genres and encounters.

Facebook’s implementation of autoplaying video happened against a backdrop of considerable hostility, however. It was, in some ways, the reinvention of an audio-visual content strategy that had already undergone its rise and fall in the digital age. In the late 2000s, alongside increasingly ubiquitous mobile phone use and large-scale adoption of broadband internet access (with accompanying dramatic and ongoing increases in bandwidth), digital marketing platforms began offering video advertisements among their array of online advertising products. Many of these videos were intrusive, designed to block much of a website’s visual real estate and to begin to play automatically, without warning to the viewer and without providing any means for the

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Blattberg, “Like It or Not, Autoplay Video Won,” *Digiday*, posted 21 April 2015. <http://digiday.com/publishers/autoplay-video-beat-regular-video-sorry-guys/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.



viewer to stop or remove the ad.<sup>3</sup> User response to such ad tactics was almost uniformly negative, and user-generated “how-to” posts proliferated across internet forums and tech blogs, offering step-by-step instructions for disrupting or disabling such advertisements on specific websites or entire browsers. Further, implementing autoplaying video was construed not just as an annoyance, but as objectively bad internet practice—the 2008 Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) assembled by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) recommended against the use of autoplay as an *inaccessible* tactic.<sup>4</sup> Years later, in 2013 (the year that Facebook launched its autoplay video rollout), an earlier piece in *Digiday* still called autoplaying ads “the most hated digital ad tactic,” indicating the resilience of the form, on the one hand, and a widespread industry and consumer resistance to it, on the other.<sup>5</sup> That earlier piece also pointed to a key driver of hatred for autoplaying ads—their autoplaying sound:

You’re sitting in front of your computer at work, and you’re surfing Twitter. A friend shares a link which you find interesting. You click and as soon as the page opens up, your face gets embarrassingly red as everyone in your silent office looks at you. You were just served an autoplay video.<sup>6</sup>

This scenario demonstrates an assumed environment for *Digiday*’s demographic of web users: an open office, a bullpen or cubicles, with desktop computers’ built-in speakers projecting surprising sound into the otherwise-quiet professional space. While screens might be directional, sound, in this scenario, has the troubling capacity to pass boundaries like cubicle walls.

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<sup>3</sup> See Brian Morrissey, “Web Ads Get More Intrusive,” *ADWEEK*, published 5 August 2009. <http://www.adweek.com/news/technology/web-ads-get-more-intrusive-100063>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>4</sup> See punkchip, “Autoplay is Bad for All Users,” *Punkchip.com*, May 2009. <http://www.punkchip.com/autoplay-is-bad-for-all-users/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Josh Sternberg, “The Most Hated Digital Ad Tactic,” *Digiday*, posted 3 April 2013. <https://digiday.com/media/the-most-hated-digital-ad-tactic/>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Facebook's 2013 implementation of autoplaying video occurred, then, against a backdrop of powerful animosity for the technique. The wording of Facebook's release, the assurances that the videos autoplaying on feeds would *not* be advertisements (at least, not initially) but would be music, performances or amateur creations – these all served to push back against the extant user and tech-world feelings regarding autoplaying video. A final, crucial component to making autoplaying video a palatable standard, as Facebook paved the way for advertisers via laymen users, was avoiding the embarrassing social situation depicted in the *Digiday* piece. Facebook's new autoplaying videos did not autoplay in their entirety—while their visual tracks would begin playing as a user scrolled past them, their audio would stay silent, until or unless the user decided to click to turn it on.

### **Viewing and Listening Ubiquitously**



*Figure 14: Still from Vine video of Shiba Inu dancing to Toto's "Africa," November 2015*

In a short video, a Shiba Inu looks eagerly into a camera (one might assume, based on video quality, a smartphone camera) and pads back and forth from foot to foot, his mouth open and tongue lolling in a wide canine “smile.”<sup>7</sup> [Figure 14] The space of the video appears domestic; the wood floor beneath the dog’s feet might be the living room or foyer of a suburban, middle-class American home. A viewer who clicks on the sound hears the distinctive synth-marimba groove of the 1982 Toto hit “Africa.” Two bars of the song play, with the lower syncopated “doo-doot-doot-do-do-doot-doo” line counterbalanced by sprightly kalimba pings. Letting the video loop *almost* results in a perfect cycling of the two bars: a brief pause in between scuttles any listener attempt at getting into a straightforward groove. The dog of the video has no such problem, however. With the sound on, it appears that the dog’s excited feet line up (at least approximately) with the sixteenth-note patterns in the sample of music – rhythmic patterns especially audible in the upper-register kalimba arpeggios. The dog’s enthusiastic bodily movements are thus mapped to the sounds. His “dancing” feet might just as equally be *producing* the bubbly cascades of pitches in this mini-cinematic moment, film music-esque “Mickey-Mousing” that keeps going, and going, and going, looping eternally. In every

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<sup>7</sup> Overlook, *Vine*, posted 3 November 2015, <https://vine.co/v/e30YQw30uTJ>. Accessed 2 March 2019. Providing attribution for objects like these videos can be tricky, for a number of reasons. First, this chapter explicates a media ecosystem in which multimedia objects were often remediating, remixed or recirculated in and across platforms, often in contexts at many degrees of remove from any intelligible “origin point” or “original creator.” Additionally, while some of the objects in the chapter (like the hedgehog video, below) originate from a clear point of authorship that one can trace back to, others (like the Kanye and sloth videos, for example) exist in a swirling terrain of exact replicas, copies made and circulated for the purpose of directing attention to new ‘authors’ and avenues of media content. Furthermore, the fragility and ephemerality of such material are manifested in dead or missing links; one especially popular iteration of the Dancing Kanye Vine was housed in a Tumblr post, which was deleted at some point in 2016. Its popularity is attested to in the number of posts from digital pop culture outlets that feature the blank space meant to be occupied by the audio-visual content of the now-defunct link. (The discontinuation of the Vine platform as a mobile application in late 2016 further highlights the issue of the precariousness—and potential transience—of digital materials that rely on such platforms as hosts.) For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to cite “original” videos, when available. In other cases, I have simply chosen a widely-shared exemplar.

context in which I have encountered the above video, it has been accompanied by one or more captions directing me to “unmute.”

The formation of “Unmute This” videos as a legible genre occurred amid a particular media ecology, in which users encountered and engaged with devices and content along delimited and in some ways predictable pathways.<sup>8</sup> In her 2013 book, Anahid Kassabian argues that technological advancements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—especially in terms of sound, amplification and mobility/portability—have ushered in a mode of “ubiquitous listening.”<sup>9</sup> This mode, which Kassabian posits as pervasive in developed urban and suburban environments (though not entirely limited to such spaces), is:

dissociated from specific generic characteristics of the music. In this mode, we listen ‘alongside,’ or simultaneous with, other activities. It is one vigorous example of the nonlinearity of contemporary life. This listening is a noteworthy phenomenon, one that has the potential to demand a radical rethinking of our various fields.<sup>10</sup>

Kassabian asserts that multiple modes of hearing and listening operate under this regime—“a *range of engagements* between and across human bodies and music technologies”—and that scholars investigating musical and sonic phenomena in lived experience of late twentieth- and

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<sup>8</sup> Addressing the media ecosystems of sound in everyday life—coalescing particularly in “Unmute This” videos—brings together a Matthew Fuller-ian “media ecology” of both analog and digital media, from digital platforms, to earbuds, to overhead broadcast music, with rich sociological work on music, sound and listening. See Tia DeNora’s *Music in Everyday Life* for an investigation of the human/technologized manipulation of sound to affect cognitive and emotional states and social relations; additionally, this thread leads through the work of Michael Bull—who focuses more narrowly on the social application and implications of particular devices such as the Walkman (2000) and the iPod (2007)—and the work of Anahid Kassabian. See Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life*, Oxford: Berg, 2000); Bull, *Sound Moves! iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Kassabian derives this term from that of late twentieth-century ‘ubiquitous computing’, coined by Mark Weiser to describe a future of mobile computing technology so pervasive as to be invisible in everyday social life. See Weiser, “The Computer for the 21st Century,” *Scientific American* 265/3 (1991): 94-105.

<sup>10</sup> Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, 9.

twenty-first-century actors should therefore attempt to account for these various listening stances in their work.<sup>11</sup> In interrogating “Unmute This” video posts as social and audio-visual phenomena, I attempt to heed this call, demonstrating how “Unmute This” directives operate to corral and direct attention, in which users are called to shift their listening stance from an assumed heterogeneous sonic background to a singular, attentive foreground focus. Such behaviors, in turn, invoke and act as participatory techniques within the so-called “attention economy” of networked twenty-first-century culture; this will be outlined in the discussion of the platform assemblage which follows. In this chapter’s account of non-linear, polysensory, multimedia genre formation, the ubiquitous listening that Kassabian theorizes operates as the necessary condition for the outlying experiences and behaviors of “unmuting” that I analyze here, and suggests a literalizing of some sonic media theory metaphors, as will also be discussed below.

A user being encouraged to “Unmute!” a video was understood to be doing so precisely within Kassabian’s ubiquitously-listening environment; the user was assumed to be surrounded by sound, shifting between states of attentive and inattentive listening. Various curated sounds might be operating in the foreground or background of a user’s perception, funneled or piped there through an array of potential digital intermediaries. Earbuds, for example, afford Michael Bull’s “sonic cocoon,” in which a user ensconces herself in a sonic world technologically separated from the aural stimuli occurring around her.<sup>12</sup> Such walled-off stimuli might include both “diegetic” noises produced by the objects in the earbud-wearer’s vicinity (subway trains, screeching traffic, chatter of pedestrians) and strategically applied “musical” sounds (Muzak,

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<sup>11</sup> Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, xxi, emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> See Bull, *Sounding Out the City*.

piped-in soundtracks from storefronts, the un-headphoned music emanating from the mobile devices of nearby strangers).<sup>13</sup> Instead of these externally applied shocks, annoyances or enthrallments, the earbud-wearer's headphones could supply her own sounds, meant to induce a particular alternate emotional or mental state. By the mid-2010s, the object at the other end of the user's headphone cord would in all likelihood have been a powerful, multipurpose computing device—a laptop, tablet or smartphone. Software on this device might have ranged from an archive of the owner's proprietary digital sonic material (say, an iTunes library packed with playlists of purchased and pirated audio files) to various music-curatorial platforms (such as streaming radio platforms like Spotify or Apple Music, or even white-noise generators). This multiplicity of potential sources of music and sound comprises a particular assemblage of Kassabian's ubiquitous listening environment, a backdrop of (in)attentive sonic engagement against which behaviors of viewing, listening, muting and unmuting might be brought into relief.

In *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne theorizes “audile techniques,” or “techniques of listening,” expanding from Marcel Mauss's “techniques of the body.” For Sterne, “audile techniques” manifest in novel situations of sensory separability, in which a variety of devices—and their application and use—make possible the isolation of sound and listening as particular practices, particular techniques. For Sterne, this “concrete set of limited and related practices of listening and practical orientations toward listening” developed across nineteenth-century

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<sup>13</sup> See Raphaël Nowak and Andy Bennett, “Analysing Everyday Sound Environments: The Space, Time and Corporality of Musical Listening,” *Cultural Sociology* 8/4 (2014): 426–442; Jonathan Sterne, “Sounds Like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space,” *Ethnomusicology* 41/4 (1997): 22–50; Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

middle-class culture, and were widely habituated along with media of the telephone, the phonograph, the radio.”<sup>14</sup>

The implementation and widespread adoption of Facebook’s autoplay standard set a particular trans-platform norm of sensory separation—of default-on vision and default off-sound. This separability between image and sound, vision and listening online and in digital media, negotiated by corporate and vernacular actors—I reading this as twenty-first-century extension of Sterne’s “audile technique.” The norm of autoplay video and muted sound—and, importantly, an understanding of it *as* a norm, and a kind of vernacular theorizing of behavior in response *to* that norm—led to the proliferation of new media genres and formats, new techniques of listening, attending, and circulating. One such genre were video posts that circulating users flagged as needing sound: unmute this.

### **Unmute What? Some Audio-Visual Materials**

A hedgehog scuttles down what appears to be a suburban street, nestled close against the curb as it runs.<sup>15</sup> [Figure 15] The height of the curb throws the tiny creature into sharp relief, making him seem even smaller in comparison, and his tiny legs can be seen rapidly working beneath his chubby, spined body. The videography is simple – the camera (again, one might assume, from a smartphone) pans from the right to the left, pivoting to follow the hedgehog as he dashes past the camera’s operator. Originally a post on the video-centered social media site Vine,

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<sup>14</sup> Sterne, *Audible Past*, 90.

<sup>15</sup> @Marutaro The Hedgehog, “Soniiiiiiiiic,” *Vine.com*, 6 November 2016. <https://vine.co/v/OeJOWez71a1/>. Accessed 2 November 2016.

the video lasts only six seconds; the visuals by themselves provide an amusing, if mundane, glimpse of a cute animal going about its day in the human world.



Figure 15: Still from @Marutaro *The Hedgehog*, “Soniiiiiiiiic” Vine video, November 2016

Click the sound on, however, and an audio-visual pun occurs. An upbeat tune—the theme from Sega’s 1991 *Sonic the Hedgehog* video game—begins to play. Here again, blipping upper-register electronic scales and trills contrast with a lower, syncopated synth-brass tune. Once again, the animal’s feet seem to align with the fast pulses articulated most strongly in the music’s upper register. Instead of entering into a cinematic space, the hedgehog protagonist of this video has perhaps been transported into a videogame—his linear progress takes on a particular kind of shape and urgency for viewer/listeners familiar with the flat, “side-scroller” landscapes prevalent in 1990s video games.





Figure 16: Still from Vine video of Kanye West dancing (to Rugrats theme music), August 2015

In another video, Kanye West dances at the center of a fixed frame, amidst a larger crowd at an awards show performance.<sup>16</sup> [Figure 16] His shoulders shrug and his body dips and rises in time. It would seem more intuitive to turn the sound on here – Kanye is clearly dancing to some music. The sound, when it comes, however, is not what might be expected, based on a prior knowledge of Kanye’s status in the mid-2010s as a hip hop star and rapper. Instead of sounds indexing blackness, rap, hip hop, pop or anything remotely cool or urban, the unmuting viewer

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<sup>16</sup> @BuzzFeed, “Kanye always on beat,” *Vine.com*, 31 August 2015. <https://vine.co/v/eId3WeuIBV6/>. Accessed 23 December 2016. This video, in particular, circulated widely in mirrored versions shortly following its creation, often in memetic constellations featuring alternative “backing tracks” for Kanye’s dancing. Because of the large number of aggregating online pop culture articles that feature dead links to videos fitting this one’s description, it can be assumed that the original was deleted at some point following its rise to popularity.

encounters the bubbly, upbeat theme of the animated children's show *Rugrats*, which aired on the Nickelodeon network across the 1990s.

In another, a small sloth bends backwards, looking up into the camera and filling its frame with his face, all round wet nose and sleepy eyes.<sup>17</sup> [Figure 17] He seems to be hanging on a jungle gym of some sort, a latticed structure of metal bars over grass below. But all of this must be grasped in a second – the sloth opens his mouth, showing tiny teeth, and then almost immediately falls backwards, his face disappearing from the frame as his body swings from a lower pole.



*Figure 17: Still from Vine video of baby sloth losing its balance, September 2015*

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<sup>17</sup> @Ellie Hall, "Here is a Baby Sloth Losing its Balance," *Vine.com*, 4 September 2015. <https://vine.co/v/eTj709UUxP7/>. Accessed 18 February 2017.

Once again, captions on posts enclosing this brief video tend to urge a viewer to unmute it. The sound in this case is not an added soundtrack but the “diegetic” sounds made by the sloth itself. A low bleat, when the sloth first opens his mouth, transforms into a much higher-pitched yelp as the small animal falls backwards. The noises are adorable and just slightly strange; the timbre of sloth sound might not be quite familiar to most viewers, and the pitch of the cries is lower than one might expect to emerge from such a diminutive creature. All the same, someone encountering (and unmuting) the video might be awakened to anthropomorphic empathy via the soundtrack, particularly at the comedically evocative ‘gnaaaaa!’ of the sloth’s fall—not the sound of mortal peril, but of surprised-yet-resigned distress.

A small green parrot struts towards a camera with evenly paced, rhythmic steps.<sup>18</sup> [Figure 18] Its bright head and red beak bob slightly in time as it advances, crossing one leg in front of the other with each step. Again, this video seems to be footage of a domesticated animal in a domestic space; wood paneling provides the bird’s runway, and the video and filming qualities suggest amateur production. The sound to unmute, in this case, is a clip from Beyoncé Knowles’s track “Crazy in Love;” the beat of the music’s opening percussion and horn fanfare matches the regular fall of bird steps, and the enthusiastic cheering of featured artist Jay-Z seems, in this pairing, to be directed towards the strutting avian. (The surprise of the musical match-up is somewhat given away by the video’s title, which includes the clever-but-revealing portmanteau “Birdyoncé.”)

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<sup>18</sup> @Birdyoncé, “Birdyoncé,” *Vine.com*, 20 June 2015. <https://vine.co/v/eiPzmHEEUHm/>. Accessed 23 December 2016.



*Figure 18: Still from Vine video of “Birdyoncé” strutting towards the camera, June 2015*

The videos described above are mid-2010s internet phenomena, which circulated and were consumed as posts on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Vine and Tumblr. Enclosed in relatively standard forms, these videos appeared in feeds as rectangles within rectangles, framed by various material identifying the poster’s username and avatar, the post date, the platform and providing various options for interaction and sharing.<sup>19</sup> This framing

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<sup>19</sup> As I characterize them in this chapter, “Unmute This” videos have circulated largely on the platforms of Vine, Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr. While the opening anecdote of the chapter suggests the primacy of Facebook for ushering in the autoplay video standard, it is important to note that Facebook is, for a number of reasons, not the primary platform locus of “Unmute This” videos. For one, it is much less platform-intuitive to circulate a post—with an affixed caption—on Facebook, than on Twitter or Tumblr. (This notion of particular platform affordances will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.) Facebook-specific responses to the autoplay paradigm tended instead towards the use of captions or visible text within videos themselves, with a number of formulaic captioning methods becoming prevalent by the mid 2010’s. I consider such formulations to be coexistent and related, rather than opposed or distinct; further work on internet-mediated genres could certainly foreground a more cross- or trans-platform investigation of formal and sensory strategies.

material is what Gerard Genette would dub “paratextual”: “functioning at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it.”<sup>20</sup> In particular, the above posts featured a specific kind of paratextual guidance—a caption or metadata tag urging other users to “unmute” the video (what I will refer to below as an “Unmute This” directive). The work of cultural theorist Jonathan Gray provides a useful enrichment to Genette’s theory; Gray suggests that paratexts (which, for Gray, encompass movie trailers, press materials and more) are *constitutive* of a text’s meaning, not simply ancillary to it.<sup>21</sup> My argument here follows and expands on this logic—that the caption paratexts are integral to and inseparable from the genre formation that they help enact.

Therefore, it is this *full* collection of components—a short video, its default-muted sound, its containment in a standard social media post form, and the appendage of an “Unmute This” directive paratext—that I seek to think of as an audio-visual internet *genre*.

### **Unmute This: Iterating a Microgenre**

In considering “Unmute This” videos as a genre, I begin by adapting Franco Fabbri’s classic definition of musical “genre” for my own usage. For Fabbri, genre is “a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules.”<sup>22</sup> Following this, one might say that an internet video genre is a set of audio-visual and/or textual

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<sup>20</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); 1.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Franco Fabbri, “A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications,” *Popular Music Perspectives*, 52-81, edited by David Horn and Philip Tagg (Göteborg and Exeter: International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1981); 52.

events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules—with “course” broadly encompassing the unfolding of the video’s content, the unfolding of the experience of watching and listening to the video and the progress of the video’s circulation and markup, via captions, comments and tagging.

One might think of “Unmute This” videos as a *microgenre* operating within the larger genre of internet or viral videos: a very particular, though discretely operating, variety, with its own conventions and trajectories. “Unmute This” videos tend to share a number of audio-visual characteristics (Fabbri’s “events”), but coalesce around a single common notion – that the audio component is not just vestigial, but that these videos necessitate fundamentally *audio-visual* experiences to achieve their fullest effect. Videos that acquire the “Unmute This” directive via user captions are understood to be incomplete in their visual parameters alone. They are usually short, oftentimes (but not always) cross-platform re-posts of six-second Vines. Across the range of videos described above—internet artifacts ranging from 2014 to 2015—common content elements recur as well: cute animals, repetitive movement suggesting rhythm or pulse, and straightforward but amusing and/or endearing visuals, possibly conveying compelling affect or a mini-narrative.

Additionally, the videos, when unmuted, effect either “diegetic” or “non-diegetic” sonic surprises. Posts like the falling sloth video foreground the sound of the video’s actors as the loci of surprise—the sloth’s cries might be unexpectedly bleaty, a kitten’s mewls might be adorably tiny, a goat’s yell might resemble a human scream. On the other hand, many “Unmute This” videos feature non-diegetic “soundtracks”: pre-existing, often familiar songs or sets of sounds superimposed over the (otherwise unconnected) visual. The relationships of sound and image in these videos are semiotic or “musical,” rather than causal, occurring outside or beyond the “real”

sonic world of the visuals. The relationships between image and sound are also, importantly, humorous. Kanye dances to the *Rugrats* theme because a creative user perceived a closeness between West's dancing movements and the speed of the theme's musical pulse; this closeness ironically amplifies the great distance between the white, suburban, cartoon milieu of *Rugrats* and the black, urban hip-hop context associated with West's music and confrontational persona. Birdyoncé's strut similarly fits the timing of duple meter hits in "Crazy in Love," as well as visually paralleling the iconic leg-crossing strut of Beyoncé in the "Crazy in Love" video's initial moments. The hedgehog video relies on a shared cultural sonic (and *Sonic*) memory.

It is necessary, then, that the cluster of participants around these posts fall somewhere between Stephanie Baker's "mediated crowd," Henry Jenkins' participatory audiences, and Benedict Anderson's "imagined community"—"Unmute This" videos circulate among and resonate with users possessing a shared intertextual repertoire.<sup>23</sup> They rely on—and engender an understanding of—a shared set of cultural texts, experiences and values in the viewers that produce, enjoy and disseminate them. "Unmute This" creators and sharers in the above instances

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<sup>23</sup> Baker's formulation draws on the seminal work of Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, extending Le Bon's theories to twenty-first-century practices enabled by mobile digital media and ubiquitous social media platforms, in which a geographically dispersed network of individuals nonetheless achieves and expresses a united orientation, via the affordances of social media platforms. For Jenkins, audiences of media content in Web 2.0 environs are not mindless consumers, but active participants; "spreading" media along pathways of social networks comprises agentic cultural work (Jenkins et al. 2013; Jenkins et al. 2015). Finally, I cite Anderson at the risk of becoming yet one more of the "vampires of banality" that have "sucked almost all of the blood" from the concept of "Imagined Communities" (Anderson 2006: 207). However, I (like the other vampires) find the concept productive beyond the original implementation, particularly when conceiving of the affective and generative potency surrounding cultural objects circulating among diffuse, geographically distanced users, in interactions often more imagined than "real." Below, Georgina Born's 2001 invocation of musically imagined communities is one such productive use that I engage in this argument. See Stephanie Baker, "The Mediated Crowd: New Social Media and New Forms of Rioting," *Sociological Research Online*, 16:4:21 (2011), <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/4/21.html>; Jenkins, Green, and Ford, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2013); Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

must “get the joke” or sonic “twist” afforded by turning on the sound. This necessitates a shared familiarity with the palate of intertextual references at play, which in the above cases span American children’s television programming, video games, pop, hip-hop, and celebrity culture from the 1980s to the 2010s. Georgina Born suggests that the activating of such shared experience is a crucial component of genre formation itself, that “music’s capacity to animate imagined communities, aggregating its adherents into virtual collectivities and publics based on musical and other identifications” is one of the planes through which music mediates the social, and by which genre is formed.<sup>24</sup>

This more social turn in genre theory, which Born, David Brackett and other scholars have recently advanced, pushes against definitions of genre that center around the enumeration of style features.<sup>25</sup> Instead, both Born and Brackett employ Deleuzian notions of deterritorialization and assemblage to assert the heterogeneous, contingent and relational character of genre. Genres are necessarily historical formations, which come into being through the negotiations of creators and consumers. The genre of the “Unmute This” video can be delimited formally—it is a video post with a caption, comment or set of comments directing a viewer to “unmute” the video’s sound; the visual content of the video itself is made humorous or additionally meaningful in some way through the addition of sound. But even the caption points to added layers of temporality and sociality—while the entreaty to “unmute this” might stem from the video’s original creator, it more often originates from other viewers, as commentary

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<sup>24</sup> Georgina Born, “Music and the Materialization of Identities,” *Journal of Material Culture*, 16/4 (2001): 381.

<sup>25</sup> Born, “Music and the Materialization of Identities”; David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).



tacked on to a video post, rather than original to it. And furthermore, these characteristics did not simply spring into existence but arose from users' reactions to platform affordances, which built up through repetition into familiar grooves, recognizable patterns. For Brackett, such iteration, or citationality, is central to genre formation:

musical genres operate on the principle of general citationality or iterability. They refer to generic conventions that are constantly being modified by each new text that participates in the genre. A pervasive framework of citationality, and the constant (however slight) modification of a genre created by each individual instantiation of it, means that texts refer to a model that they are bringing into existence.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, Brackett's definition of musical genres in terms of citationality actually resonates quite closely with Limor Shifman's now-standard definitions of memes—content units sharing characteristics of form or content, that have been created and circulated with awareness of each other.<sup>27</sup> Memes are iterative microgenres that erupt and reshape in a fast-paced, reflexive multiplicity, often with no one site of departure, no one paradigmatic central unit. While “Unmute This” posts do share features, they became recognizable as a genre of posts through an accretion of iterative social (and sociotechnical) behaviors. Further, some of the shared features of “Unmute This” posts—including the caption from which I have derived my term for them—are effects of sociality and artifacts of circulation themselves and perhaps are more constitutive of the genre than any more commonplace shared audio-visual characteristic.

### **Platform Economy and the Social Media Sensorium**

“Unmute This” posts became visible—and became legible members of this genre—through being shared broadly on social media platforms. By the mid-2010s, online sociality was

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<sup>26</sup> Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 7.

dominated by the presence of a few key technological players: a collection of websites designed to afford frictionless connection, communication, and sharing of content between acquaintances, peers, and users with shared interests: social media platforms. Over the course of the 2000s and 2010s, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr emerged from niche specialist enclaves to amass enormous, near-comprehensive user bases across the United States and the world. Users of these platforms occupied interchangeable-but-dividuated digital spaces—personal “pages” housed within easily searchable structures, in which users performed and exhibited themselves and their everyday lives.

I follow Tarleton Gillespie’s colloquially-adapted definition of “platform” as:

online sites and services that

a) host, organize, and circulate users’ shared content or social interactions for them

b) without having produced or commissioned (the bulk of ) that content,

c) built on an infrastructure, beneath that circulation of information, for processing data or customer service, advertising, and profit.<sup>28</sup>

Other researchers of digital platforms have stressed the ways in which platforms reside as negotiations between the interests of users and of the platforms’ corporate and advertiser-customer interests, between the cooption of users’ outputs and those users’ creative misuses of the platform. Rather than a static entity, José van Dijck describes a platform as a “set of relations that constantly needs to be performed,” because of continuous frictions between users’ and platforms’ goals, their conflicting notions of legitimate use.<sup>29</sup>

Broadly, the growth-to-ubiquity of massive platforms like Facebook and Google (alongside the ubiquitization of mobile devices like smartphones) over the course of the 2010s

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<sup>28</sup> Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14.

helped to effect what Marc Andrejevic calls “the process of digital enclosure,” in which “activities formerly carried out beyond the monitoring capacity of the Internet are enfolded into its virtual space.”<sup>30</sup> This occurred, in part, through what Toby Lester calls “the tyranny of convenience,” by which consumers were induced to voluntarily enter into digital enclosure to more easily accomplish an array of transactions, performances, and relationships.<sup>31</sup> Social media platforms enclosed modes of geographically-disbursed communication, of public self-performance, of casual keeping-in-touch and staying-in-the-know. Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, Reddit and YouTube, Google and Instagram—they enclosed the consumption of news and its production. They enclosed music and musicking: search and discovery of new artists, performances of fannish devotion, publication and promotion of creative musical endeavors.

The ubiquitous enclosure of 2010s digital platforms effected entwined achievements in surveillance and economic transduction—indeed, the surveillance and data capture are precisely what are transduced into capital, through sales of users-as-data to advertisers. Recent neologisms of “platform capitalism” and “the platform economy” evidence the extent to which the 2010s assemblage of platforms, its ubiquity in variegated everyday usage, its overwhelming capture of behavioral data, are imbricated in—even foundational to—contemporary economic flows and the workings of contemporary capital.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Marc Andrejevic, “The Work of Being Watched: Interactive Media and the Exploitation of Self-Disclosure,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19/2 (2002): 230-248; 238.

<sup>31</sup> Toby Lester, “The Reinvention of Privacy,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 2001): 27–39.

<sup>32</sup> See Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon, “Platform Capitalism: The Intermediation and Capitalisation of Digital Economic Circulation,” *Finance and Society* 3 (2016): 11–31; Martin Kenney and John Zysman, “The Rise of the Platform Economy,” *Issues in Science and Technology* 32/3 (2016): 61–69.

Though massive social media platforms emerged as distinct entities, with functional distinctions in form and affordance, they grew to resemble each other in many ways through processes of convergent technic evolution; corporate developers borrowed and adapted popular features from one another, evolving mechanisms through which to integrate and enfold the products and processes enabled by one platform into the performance of another. By the mid-2010s, the majority of these platforms' functional architecture centered around the format of the feed. (This in contrast to architectures like the WebRing, or other rhizomatic networks of individual user pages, or even the nested digital structures of formats like forums or message boards.) The "feed," a vertical column of content blocks, arranged (largely-)chronologically from top:newest to bottom:oldest, perhaps achieved the apotheosis of Lev Manovich's new media modularity, realizing an internet-updating of Raymond Williams's televisual flow.<sup>33</sup>

In his classic study of television as a cultural form, Raymond Williams theorized programmed television as "a new kind of communication phenomenon," in which "the true series is not the published sequence of program items but this sequence transformed by the inclusion of another kind of sequence, so that these sequences together compose the real flow, the real 'broadcasting.'"<sup>34</sup> If the techniques of programmatic televisual flow involved the braiding of threads of advertising and entertainment, the feed functionality of 2010s social media platforms effected this even more seamlessly. The stacked content-blocks of the feed were designed by platform developers, but populated by platform users (and advertisers). Advertising

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<sup>33</sup> See Manovich, *Language of New Media*. Across the mid-to-late 2010s, this performance and temporality would be mediated more and more by alternative temporalities introduced through the performance of curatorial algorithms, meant to solve problems of "attention." Facebook again pioneered this change, and Twitter notably adopted it in 2016. See Taina Bucher, "A Technicity of Attention: How Software 'Makes Sense'," *Culture Machine* (www.culturemachine.net) 13 (2012): 17.

<sup>34</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, edited by Ederyn Williams (London: Routledge, 1974/2003); 91.

content modules could interleave nearly undetectably with capsules of entertainment, morsels of personal communication, shards of celebrity intrigue—flowing endlessly, content independently supplied, with the flow’s temporality powered by the scrolling fingers of the users themselves. Feeds originally visually manifested a particular temporal logic, their (relatively-)chronological sequence of posts, and regular automatic datings of novel content effecting performances of a distinct mediated “real-time.” But the feed, and that real-time, also highlighted a problem of abundance, of concentration, of surplus. Users could easily get lost in the “flow” of the feed.

Despite the fact of social media platform feeds’ clear visuality, a number of media scholars have theorized the techniques of engaging with such mediated flows, not in optical terms, but in sonic and musical ones. Kate Crawford forwards “listening” as a productive sensory metaphor for construing the engagement of users with this proliferating stream, unfolding in algorithmically-mediated “real” time:

The act of listening to several (or several hundred) Twitter users requires a kind of dexterity. It demands a capacity to inhabit a stream of multilayered information, often leaping from news updates to a message from a friend experiencing a stressful situation, to information about a stranger had for lunch, all in the space of seconds. Some will require attention; many can be glimpsed and tuned out.<sup>35</sup>

This notion of tuning in and out of the feed resonates with the sensory listening practices suggested by Yves Citton’s proposed “polyphonic attention,” of adjusting “to the heterogeneous multiplicity of constraints, voices and projects that are superimposed on one another in the great collective improvisations that are our social formations.”<sup>36</sup> Under these formation, users must develop sensory techniques modeled on the audile to determine what merits consideration amongst a stream of modules—and then perhaps “giving voice,” passing some element or other

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<sup>35</sup> Crawford, “Following You,” 529.

<sup>36</sup> Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 188.

along. For “Unmute This” videos, passing along an element affixed with a particularly striking klaxon: “OMG TURN THE SOUND ON.”

### **Earbuds and Eyeballs: Theorizing Vernacular Sensory Experience**

Nicholas John points out the discursive tangle of meanings around the concept of “sharing,” such that the term’s metaphorical deployment in social media parlance is freighted with both communicative and communal weight.<sup>37</sup> By the mid-2010s, sharing had been reified by massive platforms like Facebook as a technic coalescence of early-Internet techniques. Jean-Christophe Plantin et al. frame such coalescence in platform capital terms: “social media platforms bind pre-defined communicative acts to an economic logic. For example, ‘like,’ ‘share,’ and ‘retweet’ not only provide a means for users to express themselves but also facilitate ranking, product recommendations, and data analytics.”<sup>38</sup> However, the process at work in “Unmute This” directives employs operations not entirely circumscribed by this binding, or by a simple mid-2010s social media sense of “posting content to a feed so that others might view it.” A complex set of social logics is being enacted in this process, as a viewer of a video decides to “share” it with an additional directive to “Unmute!”

The aforementioned effects of an “Unmute This” video’s sonic surprise rest on an assumption that someone encountering an “Unmute This” caption would have had a certain kind of experience of platforms and devices and would have behaved in a certain way. Beginning as a viewer only, she would have seen at least a portion of the video—if not the whole thing—with

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<sup>37</sup> Nicholas John, “The Social Logics of Sharing,” *The Communication Review* 16/3 (2013): 113–31.

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Christophe Plantin, Carl Lagoze, Paul N. Edwards and Christian Sandvig, “Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook,” *new media & society* 20/1 (2018): 297.

the audio *off* before electing (perhaps via the advice of an “Unmute This” commenter) to turn *on* the sound. Based on the conditions outlined in this chapter’s first section, with Facebook’s successful implementation of the autoplaying video paradigm, this assumed scenario might seem intuitive and natural. This mediatized naturalness covers over a rather sharp reversal of received sensory wisdom, however, and so bears considering in further detail.

In his introduction to *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne enumerates what he calls “the audio-visual litany,” an array of binaries that have tended to frame modern western thinking about the differences between viewing and listening, seeing and hearing that are “often considered as biological, psychological and physical facts, the implications being that they are a necessary starting point for the cultural analysis of sound”<sup>39</sup> His litany is extensive and serves as an illustrative catalog of the multitudinous ways in which ideologically loaded assumptions regarding sensory perception are shuffled into neat binaries. One central assumption is that hearing is immersive and automatic, while vision is perspectival and elective. In part, this assumption is based in biological reality. While eyelids exist and function as a dampening mechanism for vision, no analogous bodily component exists to selectively or reflexively block the reception of sound. Hearing is “always on”—because there are no “lids” for our ears to shut out or stop our reception of sound.

In the assemblage assumed by commenters urging one another to “Unmute” particular posts, however, the opposite scenario is assumed—a flipped set of circumstances, an ecosystem in which vision is always being passively engaged, but hearing is discretionary and must be actively singled out and switched on. One’s fullest attention, it is assumed, is a listening, rather than viewing, attention. Of course, such a neat flip is complicated by the previous assertion of a

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<sup>39</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 14.

ubiquitous listening environment—the elective switch to conscious, attentive listening might easily be a switch from the passive, immersed listening that the audio-visual litany assumed. It might be most accurate to suggest that full attentiveness is *audio-visual*.

In identifying this particular sensory paradigm and responding to it, “Unmute This” directors are deploying what I understand as a vernacular media theory, in which non-institutional users respond to institutionally-imposed forms and protocols, using their own experiences and behaviors as predictive, abstractable models for the behavior and experiences of other users.<sup>40</sup> I follow from Robert Glenn Howard’s suggestion of the web as, not a space of “pure vernacular,” but what he calls a “dialectical vernacular,” in which institutional and non-institutional practices and protocols inform one another.<sup>41</sup> Practices like the “Unmute This” directive reveal—and in some ways work to resolve—dissonances between institutional and user ideals of platform use and experience. A number of assumptions underpin the creation of an “Unmute This” caption or tag, including:

- The sound would not have automatically turned on when a viewer encountered the video; the viewer would have encountered a sound-free moving image.
- A user viewing the video would not turn the sound on unless otherwise prompted.
- The experience of viewing the video with the sound would be a worthwhile experience for any user encountering the post (and its “Unmute This” caption).
- A user encountering the video would desire to have the same experience that the “Unmute This” captioner had, of viewing the video with the sound. That by following the urging of the captioner, they would be able to have that experience.

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<sup>40</sup> There are some resonances here with Bernie Hogan’s notion of the curatorial or exhibitional mode in social media performance, though I would argue that the application of an “Unmute This” directive is not simply an externally aimed performative gesture but is additionally a reflexive, reciprocal, community-building one as well. See Hogan, “The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 30/6 (2010): 377–386.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Glenn Howard, “The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25/5 (2008): 491.



- A user encountering the caption—perhaps being familiar with other similarly captioned posts and having had good experiences with them—would trust the caption and heed its advice.

Adding an “Unmute This” caption is an outward-facing, (imagined) community-serving behavior, in which a user seeks to help other users achieve an ideal entertainment experience, acknowledging and rectifying the above assumed situations. In their paradigmatic form, “Unmute This” directives are added by users separate from the initial creator or poster of the video—they are sharing content that they have discovered, rather than produced, but they are also encouraging behavior that results, by their own estimation, in the optimal consumption experience. Affirmations of this behavior circulated through social media, sometimes even detached from the videos themselves, in text-based posts exclaiming things like:

You know it’s going to be a good video when the only caption is “unmute this”.<sup>42</sup>

tbh I really appreciate “UNMUTE THIS” comments on tumblr vids.<sup>43</sup>

Such affirmations attested to not only the perceived benefits of the “Unmute This” captioning, but also indicated the perceived community-wide legibility of the genre and practice.

### **Aspiration and Attention: Exhausting “Unmute This”**

Not all responses to “Unmute This” posts exhibited such exuberant positivity and grateful pleasure, however. Numerous stand-alone text posts, such as the ones shown below, drawn from Tumblr posts, cite the captioning practice as a source of frustration.

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<sup>42</sup> @whatalovelyfuckingphantom, *Tumblr.com*, 6 January 2015.  
<http://whatalovelyfuckingphantom.tumblr.com/post/107379401511/you-know-its-going-to-be-a-good-video-when-the>. Accessed 2 February 2016.

<sup>43</sup> @nostalgichopeful, *Tumblr.com*, 20 March 2016.  
<http://nostalgichopeful.tumblr.com/post/141353288302/tbh-i-really-appreciate-unmute-this-comments-on>. Accessed 12 February 2016.

“unmute this”  
- Everybody on every video.<sup>44</sup>

“PLEASE UNMUTE THIS VINE”  
u kno what fuc yo ass. i was gonna... i was gonna unmute the vine bc it has fuckin dialogue so obviously i gotta unmute iit to get it but u know what??? u fucking know what????/??? yo ugly ass comment makin me want to not unmute. yeah! im just gonna fuckin stare at this muted vine for 10 minutes to piss ya th fuck off. stfu<sup>45</sup>

“Unmute this!!!” Fuck you. F cuk you<sup>46</sup>

Just as the celebratory posts suggested the legibility of the “Unmute This” genre and invoked a repertoire of attentive, participatory techniques, the existence of this negatively-charged reactionary metacommentary also forwards a number of suggestions. First, the pervasiveness and recognizability of the “Unmute This” directive are clearly *also* evidenced in such negative responses. Like the celebratory responses, the posts quoted above similarly do not take the form of paratextual responses such as captions or tags—they are not affixed to particular “Unmute This” videos, but instead reference them as general phenomena that are presumed to be familiar to the posts’ readers. Second, these negative posts show the extent to which “Unmute This” directives rely upon the production of trust—and are thus laden with the potential for betrayal, if a user following the directive finds the resulting video boring or a waste of time. Such vitriolic responses to “Unmute This” directives indicate the extent of the *stakes* of turning on a video’s sound, which is clearly a process involving some effort and investment, with an understood and expected reward. The simple button click that effects the unmuting belies a greater assemblage

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<sup>44</sup> @tastytexan, *Tumblr.com*, 2 March 2015. <http://tastytexan.tumblr.com/post/112543840083/unmute-this>. Accessed 12 February 2016.

<sup>45</sup> @may, *Tumblr.com*, 21 February 2015. <http://may.tumblr.com/post/111723015978/disgustednoise-please-unmute-this-vine-u-kno>. Accessed 12 February 2016.

<sup>46</sup> @sciencefreaksmeout, *Tumblr.com*, 2016. <http://sciencefreaksmeout.tumblr.com/post/141036684538/unmute-this-fuck-you-f-cuk-you>. Accessed 12 February 2016.

of possible necessary activities, like plugging in headphones, muting other noisemaking apps or processes and devoting one's attention fully—even if for only a few seconds—to both visual *and* aural stimuli.

These anti-unmute-this sentiments also suggest the swiftness with which vernacular “unmuting” directives were coopted incursion of a feature of the trajectory of genres and microgenres in the ecosystem of viral circulation in the mid-2010s. A genre that successfully demanded a fully attentive watching-and-listening modality of engagement was ripe for exploitation. After all, such postings operated in the so-called “attention economy,” a term coined by theorist Michael Goldhaber for a mediated, information-dense ecosystem in which it is the human perceptual faculty of attention that is in a relative state of scarcity—and that therefore it can be ascribed value, can function as a commodity.<sup>47</sup> While theorists like Richard Lanham make the point that provoking, curating, and capturing attention have long histories in theories of aesthetics and rhetoric, the twenty-first-century digital ecosystem of apps and platforms, networked digital devices and digital identities has spectacularized information overabundance and the understood attendant crises of “attention.”<sup>48</sup>

In this particular attention economy ecosystem, then, content creators endeavoring to attract sustained viewer/listenership might strategically add an “Unmute This” caption to induce

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<sup>47</sup> Michael Goldhaber, “The Attention Economy and the Net,” *Economics of Digital Information*, 23–26 January 1997, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/519/440>.

<sup>48</sup> See Richard Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Yves Citton's work has recently offered a critique of this formulation, pressing against the hegemony of economic metaphors to comprehend cultural structures and phenomena. While I find Citton's work quite productive, and appreciate his evocative use of musical and sonic metaphor, as articulated above, I find the rhetorical use of an economic complex quite fitting, as the objects and behaviors I analyze in this and other chapters tend to operate very much on a linkage between attention (as an engagement between software, hardware, content, and perceptual faculties), and capital—either literal economic capital, or other kinds destined (or imagined) for transmutation into material wealth.

active engagement on the part of the viewer—and, presumably, to leverage that engagement for economic gain. Such strategizing could function alongside what Brooke Erin Duffy dubs “aspirational labor,” a mode of precarious labor in creative and media fields, in which non-professional users undertake productive and relational work across various platform and mediated environments in the *pursuit* of potential social and economic capital.<sup>49</sup> The affordances of the mid-2010s social media assemblage—like context collapse, accidental “discovery” and cooption by legacy media personnel, or virality more broadly—were potential *tools* (rather than hapless accidents) to be used for the benefit of such amateur users, in the pursuit of attention, of fame, of professionalization in their creative endeavors.<sup>50</sup> Getting users to “unmute” might lead to your big viral break.

## Conclusion

The genre of “Unmute This” videos emerged from within a particular media ecosystem—that of increasingly-enclosing and widely-ubiquitous social media digital data-gathering platforms. Users produced and circulated “Unmute This” posts in response to a particular set of software-and hardware-mandated sensory constraints, and within a delimited framework of assumed listening, viewing, and scrolling behaviors. And, like so many microgenres emerging in digital spaces of the 2010s—from musical genres to memes—the “Unmute This” video quickly reached a saturation point. Tracking the tight scope of this rise and fall offers insight into the way

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<sup>49</sup> Brooke Erin Duffy, “The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19/4 (2016): 441-457.

<sup>50</sup> Of course, as Duffy notes, aspirational labor emerges from spheres of production and performance heavily gendered female. Additionally, Duffy notes that the fruits of this labor are unequally distributed—that successful conclusions to such aspiration are often achieved by those already beginning from situations of privilege or power.

that the seeming minutia or trivial add-on of a comment on a video post might offer cogent insight into dynamics of humor, aesthetics, sensory and social practices, as they entwine within the social media assemblage in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Additionally, the emergence and quick cooption of “Unmute This” captions and video posts offers an entrypoint into examining how negotiations of sound and listening factored deeply into mid-2010s attempts to harness and monetize “attention” as a commodity in a digital economy of platforms, advertisements, and data. The digital “attention” economy—I want to stress here and in the chapter that follows—is hardly ocularcentric. As the “Unmute This” microgenre demonstrates, the powerful ubiquity of a particular functionality—in this case, autoplaying video—can underpin a wide variety of responses—techniques, formats, behaviors, genres—all built around particular shared assumptions regarding sensory techniques. Those various responses—in particular strategic aspirational and corporate cooption of vernacular practices like “unmute this” tags—suggest the understood power of sound (and behaviors around sound, hearing, and listening) as a component of “attention” in the digital ecosystems of the early twenty-first century as a structuring component of platform protocols, functionalities, and techniques, and as a site of contestation, commodification, and creativity.

## CHAPTER 5: BEYONCÉ: VIRAL TECHNIQUES AND THE VISUAL ALBUM

### Surprise!

On December 12th, 2013, avid fans of pop superstar Beyoncé Knowles were subsisting in a state of resigned, low-level confusion—would Beyoncé ever release a new album? Conflicting rumors swirled. As far back as March, *MediaTakeOut.com* had suggested that an extant album—a follow up to the humdrum 2011 *4*—had been scrapped, and that it was “back to the drawing board” for a perfectionist Beyoncé and her team.<sup>1</sup> Rehashings and refutations of such rumors tumbled around gossip blogs and pop culture websites for months. In July a Beyoncé representative “categorically denied” rumors of an album delay to *The Huffington Post*, stating that no release date had ever been set, but by August, *The Hollywood Reporter* headlines cried that “Beyoncé Scraps 50 Songs Amid Endless Album Delay,” and in October famed producer Pharrell Williams was called on by *Billboard* to explain things.<sup>2</sup> Williams could only report, however, that the album was both “crazy” and “almost done.” A *Radio.com* gloss of the

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<sup>1</sup> “BEYONCE DRAMA!! Entire Album May Be SCRAPPED . . . And Pushed Back Until THIS FALL!!!” *MediaTakeOut.com*, 19 March 2013, <http://mediatakeout.com/61832/beyonce-drama-entire-album-may-be-scrapped-and-pushed-back-until-this-fall.html>. Accessed 2 March 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Kia Makarechi, “Beyoncé’s Album Delays Are Nothing But Rumors, Singer’s Rep Says,” *The Huffington Post*, 24 July 2013, 11:35am EDT, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/24/beyonce-album-delays-rumors\\_n\\_3644331.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/24/beyonce-album-delays-rumors_n_3644331.html). Accessed 3 March 2019; Shirley Halperin, “Beyoncé Scraps 50 Songs Amid Endless Album Delay,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 24 July 2013, 7:00amPDT, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/beyonce-scraps-50-songs-album-590765>. Accessed 3 March 2019; Brad Wete, “Pharrell Talks eBay Collab, Beyoncé’s Album, Scoring the ‘Spider-Man’ Sequel and More,” *Billboard.com*, 24 October 2013, 4:45pm EDT, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/5770395/pharrell-williams-ebay-beyonce-album-scoring-spider-man>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

interview stated the obvious: “the Beyhive”—the collective appellation for Beyoncé’s most devoted fans—“is all ears.”<sup>3</sup>

Crucially, however, the Beyhive were not just ears, but eyes. Just before midnight on Wednesday, December 13, 2013, a fifteen-second video was posted to Beyoncé’s official Instagram account.<sup>4</sup> [Figure 19] In the video—captioned coyly with only the word “Surprise!”—rapid-fire shots of various dancing, gyrating, and voguing Beyoncés cut to the staccato rhythms of rolling trap hi hats. Superimposed over the video’s sinuous, wordless synth groove, cryptic phrases in large, pink, sans-serif type appeared: “BEYONCÉ” – “VISUAL ALBUM” – “14 SONGS” – “17 VIDEOS”—and then, over a black background—“AVAILABLE NOW.”

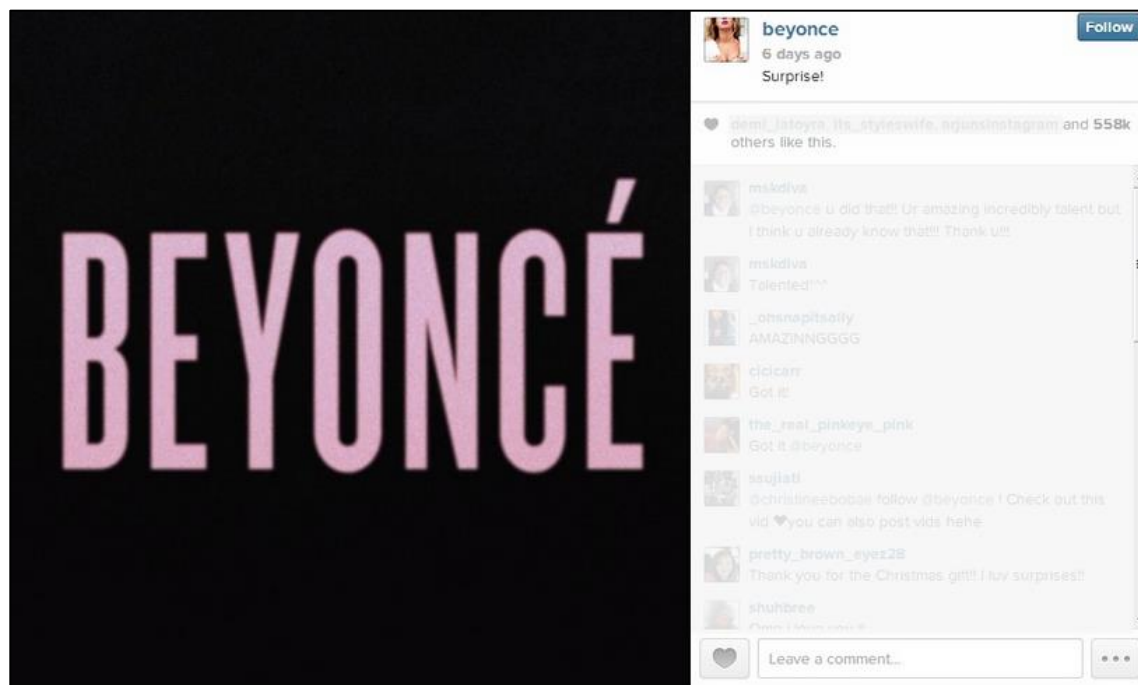


Figure 19: “Surprise!” Instagram post by @Beyoncé, December 2013

<sup>3</sup> Courtney E. Smith, “Pharrell Explains Why Beyoncé’s Album Has Been Delayed,” *Radio.com*, 25 October 2013, 1:21pm, <http://radio.com/2013/10/25/pharrell-says-beyonces-album-is-crazy/>. Accessed 2 March 2016.

<sup>4</sup> @beyonce, “Surprise!” *Instagram*, 13 December 2013. <http://instagram.com/p/h2YFO6Pw1d/>.

That single post—those fifteen seconds—hit their mark: *Billboard* reported sales of more than 80,000 copies over the span of three hours (that is, from midnight EST to midnight PT, December 13, 2013); an Apple press release boasted 617,213 US digital sales and 828,773 overall in the first three days of the album’s release.<sup>5</sup>

The immense and near-immediate economic success of the *BEYONCÉ* visual album relied on processes of viral newsmaking and circulation, and seemed to boldly eschew the traditional promotional strategies of large music industry production houses. In this chapter, I explicate how an assemblage of social media platforms, circulating musical objects, and techniques—of listening, viewing, comprehending, and participating in viral phenomena—came together in the commercial success of *BEYONCÉ*. I situate the *BEYONCÉ* album release not as a definitive *rupture* with traditional music industry practices, but as an *extension* of them, via the interpolation of an understanding of “techniques” of viral musicking, the reification of the iterating processes tracked across this dissertation thus far. Confident in the predictability of viral participatory behavior, the producers of the *BEYONCÉ* album successfully launched a curious “musical object”: a many-part, highly collaborative collection of multiply-authored tracks and videos, packaged and sold as a singular entity, and marketed on a platform of “unmediated” “honesty.”

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<sup>5</sup> Silvio Petroluongo, “Beyonce’s Surprise Album Trending Towards No. 1 on Billboard 200,” *Billboard*, 13 December 2013, 11:14am EST. <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/5839682/beyonce-surprise-album-sales-forecast-billboard-200-chart>. Accessed 3 March 2019; “BEYONCÉ Shatters iTunes Store Records With 828,773 Albums Sold in Just Three Days,” *Apple Press Info*, 16 December 2013. <http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2013/12/16BEYONC-Shatters-iTunes-Store-Records-With-Over-828-773-Albums-Sold-in-Just-Three-Days.html>. Accessed 3 March 2019.



## Theorizing *BEYONCÉ*'s Viral Techniques

The *BEYONCÉ* release leveraged and moved through an extant apparatus—of algorithms, software protocols, digital forms and devices, juridical restrictions and affordances, and fans' listening, viewing, and sharing techniques. The release also relied upon an established set of behaviors and practices—a 2013 version of my coinage of “techniques of viral participation” or “viral techniques,” a subset of a broader category of “social media techniques.” One might read the viral release of *BEYONCÉ* as an apotheosis of these techniques, a manifestation of their legibility and predictability; the album release functioned almost as their technological conrescence.

The coinage of “viral techniques” is indebted to a genealogy stretching back to sociologist Marcel Mauss, who theorized techniques as “traditional actions combined in order to produce a mechanical, physical, or chemical effect.”<sup>6</sup> Techniques, for Mauss, are crucially replicable and transmittable; the body functions as a potent site for techniques' inscription, practice, and resistance. Bernhard Siegert, drawing on the novel technological status of the body in Mauss's concept, formulates cultural techniques as human and bodily capacities which enable the “always already technological” status of the human; cultural *techniques* are the faculties and configurations of bodies and materials that allow *technologies* to concretize as such.<sup>7</sup> Viral techniques are configurations of bodies, of sensory attention—techniques of clicking and consuming, of curating and evaluating, of remixing, referencing, and sharing.

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<sup>6</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Technology,” in *Techniques, Technology & Civilisation*, edited by Nathan Schlanger (New York: Durkheim, 2006), 98.

<sup>7</sup> Bernhard Siegert, “Cultural Techniques: Or the End of the Intellectual Post-war in German Media Theory,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30 (2013): 56.

An adjacent, but highly useful concept to Seigert's widely-deployed "cultural techniques" is Taina Bucher's work on social media *technicity*, a construction which productively destabilizes ossified, object-centered connotations of social media platforms and digital devices as "technology" in favor of foregrounding the contingent, relational interactions of humans, devices, and code.<sup>8</sup> For Bucher, technicity "offers a way to understand how processes and practices...are grounded in a sociotechnical milieu."<sup>9</sup> Technicity (a term that Bucher adapts from the work of Adrian Mackenzie) is a *capacity* for a material or entity to produce certain effects—a button can be pushed, a screen can be pressed, tapped, or swiped.<sup>10</sup> Platforms have their own particular technicities as well—tweets can be retweeted, their visibility and dissemination altered in particular ways; Facebook posts can be shared, Instagram posts liked. To account for the practices by which users interact with the twenty-first-century proliferation of digital media content, Bucher theorizes what she terms "technicities of attention," in which *attention* is managed at the intersection of bodies, devices, and algorithms in social media platforms.

As this terminology of Bucher's suggests, then, the particular sociotechnical milieu of *BEYONCÉ* resides firmly in what has been theorized by Michael Goldhaber, and others as the "attention economy," in which information is overabundant, and attention is in a relative state of scarcity—and therefore can be ascribed value and function as a commodity.<sup>11</sup> A pivotal factor in

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<sup>8</sup> Taina Bucher, "A Technicity of Attention: How Software 'Makes Sense'," *Culture Machine* (www.culturemachine.net) 13 (2012): 1-23.

<sup>9</sup> Bucher, "Technicity of Attention," 11.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Mackenzie, *Transductions: Bodies and Machines and Speed* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Goldhaber, "The Attention Economy and the Net," *Economics of Digital Information*, 23–26 January 1997, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/519/440>; For a recent review of literature regarding and critiquing the concept of the attention economy, and its deployment in various disciplinary, theoretical, and

this process, Goldhaber argues, is that *attention* can be transduced into physical *action*.<sup>12</sup> This particular process of transduction—from attention to action (e.g., a click-through to an article, or a series of taps to re-post some particular attention-worthy content) is crucial to the functioning of the viral apparatus. The pathways that afford such transduction are precisely the techniques of social media participation—“sharing” through retweeting, reblogging, reposting, or the action of *purchase*, via a few clicks or taps. Bucher’s arguments stress, however, that attention must not simply be treated as a cognitive category. Instead, she understands attention as emergent at the meeting point between human cognition, bodily practice, technological affordance, and the performance of software. In the feed-saturated landscape of 2010s social media platforms, Bucher argues, “attention governs and is governed in concrete material contexts and assemblages. Protocols, algorithms and buttons do not merely mediate modes of paying attention but also shape the conditions of the sensible.”<sup>13</sup> Social media platforms are assemblages that effect the transduction of code into attention, whether through curatorial techniques, or through the ever-refreshing logic of the feed. Attention, here formed at the intersection of human cognition and the performance of software, participates in the construction of the sensible—that which can be seen, heard, spoken about, known, and understood. When subjected to the extremities of speed and repetition that technicities of social media afford, the sensible becomes the viral—that which can’t be avoided, that which is heard, spoken about, and known, ubiquitously and in surfeit.

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methodological contexts, see Patrick Crogan and Samuel Kinsley, “Paying Attention: Towards a Critique of the Attention Economy,” *Culture Machine* 13 (2013): 1–29.

<sup>12</sup> In his lecture, Goldhaber demonstrated this by inserting the *non sequitur* “panda bear,” then calling on the audience members who inadvertently pictured black-and-white bears to raise their hands.

<sup>13</sup> Bucher, “Technicity of Attention,” 17.

## ***BEYONCÉ* Gets Attention**

*BEYONCÉ* began its viral takeover of pop culture attention with a single post on the image- and video-hosting platform Instagram: <http://instagram.com/p/h2rIh1Pw4C>. The post was made immediately available to Beyoncé's millions of followers—it would have graced the primary spot atop their Instagram feeds a few minutes before midnight EST, on December 13<sup>th</sup>.

In ways slightly tangential to those discussed in the previous chapter, the notion of the “feed” was central to the ecosystem in which news of the album proliferated so successfully. As a format, it helped to construct what Weltevrede, Helmond, and Gerlitz call the “real-timeness” of the 2010s social media landscape, fabricated through software performance, its pace and presentation of fresh, novel, or dynamic data to users.<sup>14</sup> The “feed”—a pervasive, nearly ubiquitous element in social media platforms of the 2010s—is a data format designed to deliver content; as one element of a website or app, it manifests itself to users as a vertical column of modular content-blocks, each containing text, links, images, video. At small time intervals, code in the platform's architecture sends out requests for more content; this cyclical refresh serves to pull new input from a variety of other feed users—in cases like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr, whomever the feed-bearing user has elected to “follow.” New content, when it arrives, pops into the top of the column, pushing the older material beneath it off of the realm of the page, into scroll-down obscurity.

The feed effects a set of relations and practices between a human user, that user's body and sensory apparatus, and sets of software protocols and algorithms—what Lev Manovich calls

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<sup>14</sup> Esther Weltevrede, Anne Helmond, and Carolin Gerlitz, “The Politics of Real-Time: A Device Perspective on Social Media Platforms and Search Engines,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 31/6 (2014): 125-150.

the “underlying engine” of contemporary society.<sup>15</sup> For example, the auto-appearing additions of new material create constant interruptions in a project of historically-minded downward scrolling, as top-of-the-screen notifications alert a user to fresh content. On an early twenty-first-century touchscreen device, techniques of the fingers help constitute a user’s bodily engagement with social media novelty: a flick upwards scrolls further into the past, while an impatient user drags her finger down the screen, from top to bottom, to encourage faster re-”new”ing.

The success of the *BEYONCÉ* release relied upon a visibility within this assemblage of bodies, content, and time. As an initial post, a social media missive from a major celebrity like Beyoncé, would have, separate from any other hubbub, attracted some modicum of attention. The cryptic caption “Surprise!” and the video content—not wholly consumable in a passing glance—could have garnered more from curious following fans. After viewing the fifteen-second video, an attentive fan would not have explicitly been given any direction: no click-through link to purchase, no announcement of participating retailers. The video-as-advertisement relied on the overwhelming supremacy of iTunes as online music store; those with a standing iTunes Store account could have seen the post, watched the video, and purchased the album in under a minute, via a few swipes, taps, or clicks—transducing attention to the action of purchase.

At the time of the album’s release, the Instagram platform offered Beyoncé’s followers the ability to engage with her post by publicly “liking” it—but no in-platform way of sharing the post’s content with others. This platform affordance would, in itself, have consigned the video announcement to a slow downward progression in all users’ feeds, towards off-screen obsolescence. Instead, the initial video post quickly spread beyond the particular confines and affordances of the Instagram feed; via cross-platform sharing capacities, a link directing others to

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<sup>15</sup> Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 8.

the precise Instagram post could easily be embedded in a post on Twitter, Facebook, or Tumblr—platforms on which the post could be more easily re-placed at the top of a given user’s feed.<sup>16</sup> In this trans-platform movement, celebrity endorsement played a crucial role. Rapper Snoop Dogg (@SnoopDogg) retweeted a link to the Instagram post, adding that “my girl @beyonce just changed d game<sup>17</sup> !!” Similarly—though without providing a link back to Instagram—Beyoncé’s sister Solange Knowles tweeted “So my sister is a fucking G. Beyoncé , the visual album out now.”<sup>18</sup> Pop stars like Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Demi Lovato, and Cher also expressed their enthusiasm for the newly-released album, as did numerous actors, comedians, and other public figures.<sup>19</sup>

In Goldhaber’s 1997 formulation of the “attention economy,” he articulates the understood imbalance between a surplus of mass-mediated information, and the limited capacity of human attention: “compared with our capacity to produce material things, our net capacity to consume those things can no longer keep pace.”<sup>20</sup> This description of a true attention economy was a prescient fit for the app-filled media landscape of the early 2010s. Kate Crawford has

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<sup>16</sup> This capacity for platform posts to enfold one another—standardized among many of the major social media platforms of the mid-2010s—is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>17</sup> @SnoopDogg (Snoop Dogg), *Twitter*, posted 13 December 2013, 3:03am. <https://twitter.com/SnoopDogg/status/411405943692197888>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>18</sup> @solangeknowles (Solange Knowles), *Twitter*, posted 13 December 2013, 12:13am. <https://twitter.com/solangeknowles/status/411363117281460224>. Accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>19</sup> @katyperry (Katy Perry), *Twitter*, posted 13 December 2013, <https://twitter.com/katyperry/status/411450025617539072>. Accessed 3 March 2019; @ladygaga (Lady Gaga), *Twitter*, posted 13 December 2013, 7:25am. <https://twitter.com/ladygaga/status/411472060498456576>. Accessed 3 March 2019; @ddlovato (Demi Lovato), *Twitter*, posted 12 December 2013, 10:15pm. <https://twitter.com/ddlovato/status/411378810336997376>. Accessed 2 March 2016; @cher (Cher), *Twitter*, posted 13 December 2013, 2:07am. <https://twitter.com/cher/status/411391839476776960>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Goldhaber, “The Attention Economy and the Net.”

usefully theorized “listening” as a potent metaphor for digital media participatory practices that receive and synthesize information, without contributing or producing it. This capacity is, once again, situated at an intersection between bodily capacities and technological performance; Crawford argues that “social media powerfully invoke an efficient listening subject, drawing together the divergent spaces of modernity in one location—while simultaneously creating a gap between this ideal and what is humanly manageable.”<sup>21</sup> The attention economy’s overabundance of information necessitates, she posits, novel modes of sensory selectivity. The aptitude for making such determinations—between which content modules in the feed require attention, and which don’t—constitutes a crucial set of techniques for viral participation. Much like in the sensory practice of listening, a feed user must decide (consciously or not) when to “tune in” and what to “tune out.” In the case of the *BEYONCÉ* release, celebrity endorsements helped to push non-celebrity users towards attentiveness. Each such celebrity missive above was pushed to the feed of thousands (or millions) of followers; subsequent retweets put each post into circulation for the followers of each retweeter—an additional opportunity for sight, for garnering attention.

Though perhaps lacking the individual heft of a celebrity voice, the social media engagement of non-celebrity participants with the *BEYONCÉ* release encouraged social media “listening” through volume and density. On the morning of December 13, 2013, celebrity and non-celebrity users alike created a repeated refrain of “BEYONCÉ BEYONCÉ BEYONCÉ,” chiming in to express their knowledge of and excitement for the new album— and thus making the album’s title, subject, and author unavoidably, virally, visible (or *audible*, in Crawford’s sense of social media listening). Such sharing practices did complicated attention economy work,

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<sup>21</sup> Crawford, “Following You,” 526.

both directing attention *to* Beyoncé and *BEYONCÉ*, and endeavoring to siphon off some of the *BEYONCÉ* attention for each user's own benefit.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately (as the above-cited celebrity tweets suggest), even ties to the original Instagram post became omittable. Comprehensible engagement expanded to further and further levels of remove, beyond the “Surprise!” announcement video as a singular node. Instead, as knowledge of the album spread more broadly, a growing variety of activities constituted “participation” in *BEYONCÉ* as a phenomenon—reposting particularly enthusiastic celebrity reactions, for example, or posting one's own all-caps response. With a few hours of remove from Beyoncé's initial Instagram post, subsequent and increasingly-abstracted modules of content needed only to indexically indicate the central kernel of information: Beyoncé had released an album.

### **Doing the Work: Black Twitter, Fan Labor and Devotional Purchase**

In theorizing the “attention economy,” Goldhaber hypothesized that “practically all organizations will be basically temporary, either communities in which attention is shared around pretty equally, or, more often, entourages of fans who form around one or a few stars to help them achieve the performances they are attempting” seems particularly useful for considering social media practice.<sup>23</sup> The *BEYONCÉ* release falls squarely into Goldhaber's latter category: a kind of collective attention-giving and attention production, aimed toward

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<sup>22</sup> This occurred at varying scales, of course, depending on whether one was an unaffiliated individual fan, with no way of monetizing any *BEYONCÉ*-related attention, or if one had affiliations with a website, journalistic web-outlet, or some other corporate entity, with structures in place for the transduction of attention into more concrete economic capital. See the discussion of “viral articles” below.

<sup>23</sup> Goldhaber, “The Attention Economy and the Net.”



participation in and elevation of a particular performance. Indeed, a recent vein of scholarship in fan studies has focused on the cultural production, promotion, and other “work” done by unpaid fans.<sup>24</sup>

Beyoncé’s broad fan base was an invaluable resource in the rapid and enthusiastic circulation of news of the visual album’s release. One particularly powerful force in within this space of “helpful” fans was the formation known as “Black Twitter.” Following on earlier appellations of “black person twitter” or “late night black person twitter,” “Black Twitter” emerged as a named concept emerging around and after 2010. It has been since theorized by scholars like Mark Anthony Neal, Sarah Florini, and Sanjay Sharma, as a diffuse communicative network of black users—often, Sharma claims, with a high follower-follow-back reciprocal relationship—articulating and performing a black identity, made digitally visible on a large scale.<sup>25</sup> Black Twitter was, in the early 2010s, mostly known for its capacity to launch trending hashtags—dubbed #blacktags—that celebrated and satirized black experience, often while raising awareness of black politics. Blacktags such as #wordsthatleadtotrouble or #ifsantawasblack were iterated through retweets or through rapid individual participation, and the density and velocity of these tweets sparked their automatic, algorithmically-determined

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<sup>24</sup> See Mark Andrejevic, “Exploiting YouTube: Contradictions of User-Generated Labor,” in *The YouTube Reader*, 406-423, edited by Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau. (National Library of Sweden, 2009); Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Electronic Book Review*, 20 June 2003. <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/technocapitalism/voluntary>; Abigail De Kosnik, “Fandom as Free Labor,” in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, 98-111, edited by Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2012); Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis, “Fandom and/as Labor,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 15 (2014). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0593>.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, “Mark Anthony Neal: ‘#BlackTwitter, #Hashtag Politics and the New Paradigm of Black Protest’,” *YouTube* 15 December 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3J9Jv91i2M>. Accessed 3 March 2019; Sarah Florini, “Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin’: Communication and Cultural Performance on ‘Black Twitter’,” *Television & New Media* 15.3 (2014): 223-237; Sanjay Sharma, “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion,” *New Formations* (2013): 46-64.

inclusion in Twitter's "Trending Topics" sidebar (which was, at that point, a feature *exclusive* to the Twitter platform). Such inclusion rendered #blacktags *visible* to a broader Twitter audience, without necessarily rendering them wholly *comprehensible* or *participatable* phenomena for Twitter users removed from the experiences and politics of the Black Twitter community.<sup>26</sup>

Black Twitter was not a monolith, nor did it constitute a full representation of black digital (or real life) experience—it has been rather, as Sharma suggests, an *assemblage* in which race and racial identities have been articulated with and through the affordances of the Twitter platform, such as retweets, hashtag searches, or the algorithmic ranking of trending hashtags. As such, attempting to precisely quantify the role of "Black Twitter" in disseminating the news of the *BEYONCÉ* album release invites insurmountable methodological difficulties—to isolate and tally the Beyoncé-related tweets emerging from "Black Twitter" users would likely necessitate categorizing these users based on external identity markers such as names and avatar images, thus inscribing a narrow identity category of "black" into fixity and overlaying that directly onto assumptions of "Black Twitter" membership. However, despite such obstacles to precise statistical quantification, the force of this powerful social and social media formation can be

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<sup>26</sup> The discourse and debates surrounding Black Twitter that unfolded in blogs and online news platforms in and around 2010 encompass a multitude of nuanced voices and intersecting perspectives. Such debates are somewhat beyond the scope of this chapter, but Choire Sicha's *Awl* piece "What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night" stands as an example of the fascination-but-not-participation of non-black tech bloggers that, ultimately, drew considerable amounts of ire. See Sicha, "What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night," *The Awl*, 11 November 2009. <https://medium.com/the-awl/what-were-black-people-talking-about-on-twitter-last-night-4408ca0ba3d6>. Accessed 15 May 2018. A piece on *Slate* by tech columnist Farhad Manjoo in August 2010 catalyzed a more concentrated debate. See Manjoo, "How Black People Use Twitter," *Slate*, 10 August 2010. [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2010/08/how\\_black\\_people\\_use\\_twitter.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2010/08/how_black_people_use_twitter.html). Accessed 15 May 2018.

Other highly circulated responses include those by Sam Sanders ("How Black People May or May Not Use Twitter," *NPR: All Tech Considered*, 16 Aug. 2010. <http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2010/08/16/129235517/how-black-people-may-or-may-not-use-twitter>. Accessed 3 March 2019.) and blogger Dr. Goddess ("Why 'They' Don't Understand What Black People Do On Twitter," *DrGoddess*, 12 August 2010. <http://drgoddess.blogspot.com/2010/08/why-they-dont-understand-what-black.html>. Accessed 3 March 2019.).

adduced through its acknowledgement in digital media reactions to the album release. For example, a BuzzFeed News countdown placed an all-encompassing “Beyoncé” in the ultimate position on its “21 Biggest #BlackTwitter moments of 2013” list—citing, in part, the 1.2 million *BEYONCÉ*-related tweets that helped circulate news of the album’s release in the first twelve hours following the initial Instagram post.<sup>27</sup>

The productive politics and communality of Black Twitter cannot simply be celebrated as an unproblematic player in the *BEYONCÉ* release story, however. Rather, it is incumbent to note that the formation’s existence, by 2013, was known and predictable enough to be relied upon as an easily leveraged site for the unpaid labor of its participants. Circulation through and beyond Black Twitter transferred the *paid* work of advertisers, producers, and other professionals traditionally employed in a major album release to a largely-anonymous, *unpaid* fan mass.<sup>28</sup> But it would be equally problematic to portray Beyoncé fans and Black Twitter participants as hapless dupes—acknowledgement of the uneven power and labor dynamics permeated the digital discourse around the album as well, often even in laudatory tones. In an oft-repeated joke, Twitter users suggested the following imaginary dialogue:

beyonce’s publishing team: how are we going to promote your new album  
beyonce: i’m beyonce  
beyonce’s publishing team: tru<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Tracy Clayton, “The 21 Biggest #BlackTwitter Moments Of 2013,” *Buzzfeed News*, 23 December 2013. [https://www.buzzfeed.com/tracyclayton/biggest-blacktwitter-moments-of-2013?utm\\_term=.sdoqzoLA4#.gdaQ9pYNa](https://www.buzzfeed.com/tracyclayton/biggest-blacktwitter-moments-of-2013?utm_term=.sdoqzoLA4#.gdaQ9pYNa).

<sup>28</sup> Much of the mainstream discussion of fan labor in fan studies literature skirts questions of race, or deals largely with fandom and its labors via a situation of assumed whiteness. The leveraging of Black Twitter in *this* instance is particularly freighted with of the extensive, painful, and ongoing histories of unpaid labor demanded of black individuals and black populations in America and around the world.

<sup>29</sup> See previouslysane, *Tumblr.com*, posted 13 December 2013, 1:18am. <http://previouslysane.tumblr.com/post/69861280864/beyonces-publishing-team-how-are-we-going-to>. Accessed 3 March 2019. Other iterations of this joke proliferated across and between platforms; locating an originating source

And as one Twitter user suggested, perhaps more earnestly:

“Beyonce is brilliant! Why waste time and money promoting the album when she has all her BeyHive to do it for her??”<sup>30</sup>

Such exclamations echoed in a recurring celebratory refrain that Beyoncé—at that point, one of the wealthiest black Americans and highest grossing musicians in the world—had brilliantly “made her fans do the work” of circulating and promoting the new album’s release.<sup>31</sup>

A further textual anecdote elucidates this problematic even further. Throughout the day on December 13th, following the album release announcement, Beyoncé continued to post on Instagram, including posts as innocuous as a photo of vegan cupcakes. In a comment on this later post—a metatextual utterance that *itself* circulated widely in the viral constellation surrounding the album release—user “deactivatedfatgirl” declared:

You got a lotta fuckin nerve to post a picture of some vegan cupcakes when you clearly got all of our scalps shining from snatching our hair out from the root. Girl fuck your cupcakes. Do you realize how many people gonna miss work tomorrow fucking around with you? Do you realize how many people thought they were gonna buy a good ass lunch tomorrow but now have to forego those plans because you stomped your ass into iTunes and demanded everybody’s last coin? [...] God bless God for even allowing you to be here. I mean shit.<sup>32</sup>

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or archetype is more difficult, as the joke circulated widely and without attribution almost immediately after the release.

<sup>30</sup> @EddieEhime, *Twitter.com*, posted 13 December 2013, 6:52 pm.  
<https://twitter.com/EddieEhime/status/411644952444018688>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Beyoncé ranks at number 14 on the 2012 Forbes list of Black Americans (“Richest African Americans – Forbes Wealthiest Black Americans,” *The Richest*, posted 20 April 2012, <http://www.therichest.com/rich-list/nation/wealthiest-african-americans/>. Accessed 29 October 2016.) and at number 10 on Forbes’ 2013 list of highest-paid musicians (Zack O’Malley Greenburg, “The World’s Highest-Paid Musicians 2013,” *Forbes.com*, posted 19 November 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2013/11/19/the-worlds-highest-paid-musicians-2013/#551d11de3450>. Accessed 29 October 2016.)

<sup>32</sup> @deactivatedfatgirl, comment on @beyonce, “Vegan Cupcakes,” *Instagram.com*, posted 13 December 2013, <http://instagram.com/p/h2rIh1Pw4C>. Accessed 3 March 2019. deactivatedfatgirl’s comment was captured by screenshot, which circulated in its own set of viral-content-glossing articles published by online pop culture content, gossip, and news sites such as *Gawker*.

The commenter's screed neatly, if hyperbolically, sets out a list of expected fan behaviors in response to the album release: hysteria, truancy from responsibilities, and, crucially, purchasing the album, even if such a purchase necessitates sacrifice elsewhere in one's budget. The outrage on display in this comment also humorously points out and condemns a display of *unacceptable* behavior amidst the viral fervor—specifically, populating a social media feed with something *other* than material related to the *BEYONCÉ* album (in this case, pictures of cupcakes), even by the artist herself.

The fan labor of circulating the news of Beyoncé's album release comprised one facet of viral participation; equally mandated for fulfilling fan duties was participation through purchase.<sup>33</sup> In the case of the visual album, purchase constituted an act of attention-giving and fan devotion, rather than simply an end in itself—after all, a vast number of sales were made before anyone *could* have listened to *BEYONCÉ* to evaluate and communicate its musical or aesthetic worth. The quality of the album was an assumed but largely unknown factor.<sup>34</sup>

### Interpreting A ~~Concept~~ Visual Album

In the initial hours and days of the *BEYONCÉ* album's release, the album was only available for purchase as a single entity, through iTunes—though, notably, the original Instagram video announcement gave the viewer no explicit direction towards the digital music retailer. The annunciatory post featured no click-through link to purchase the album, nor any announcement

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<sup>33</sup> See Ellis Cashmore, "Buying Beyoncé," *Celebrity Studies*, 1/2 (2010): 135-150; Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> A slightly more recent example indicates the clear disconnect between purchase and musical quality or value: Taylor Swift's so-called "Track 3"—an eight-second track of white noise mistakenly released to iTunes on October 21, 2014 (a week in advance of Swift's well-publicized *1989* release)—reached the top of the Canadian iTunes list. Whether fans purchased the track hoping for music or as humorous participation in a phenomenon springing from a corporate misstep, the purchase was again more participatory than functional.

of participating retailers. The video-as-advertisement successfully relied on the overwhelming supremacy of iTunes as *the* online music store; purchase through iTunes constituted the only way to access any of the album's sonic or visual content. Other typical modes of access, like buying single tracks, hearing them on the radio, or viewing videos on platforms like YouTube or Vimeo, were unavailable until days or weeks after the album's release—far outside the “statute of limitations” for viral participation. Even piracy and bootlegging efforts were quashed with unusual efficacy—a fact bemoaned by numerous fans on social media, frustrated in their attempts to acquire and consume the album without paying \$15.99 for it.

The constraints of the *BEYONCÉ* release, then, coupled with the viral fan mandate towards immediate purchase, meant that full participants in the phenomenon wound up with a single multi-part, large-scale object occupying space on their hard drives and in their iTunes libraries. The obvious nomenclature for such an entity might have been “concept album,” theorized in the work of Marianne Tatom Letts, Travis Stimeling, and others, as a holistic musical object eschewing the forms of commodified singles in favor of a united narrative, musical, and artistic vision.<sup>35</sup> Paratextual materials regarding the album pushed against such a designation, however.<sup>36</sup> The album's official press release, for example, explicitly characterized

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<sup>35</sup> Marianne Tatom Letts, *Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Travis Stimeling, “‘Phases and Stages, Circles and Cycles’: Willie Nelson and the Concept Album,” *Popular Music* 30/3 (Oct 2011): 389-408. Recent work on the concept album has tended to consider intermedial and multimedial components as well, encompassing a variety of marketing materials, social media utterances, and cultural products beyond the limits of a physical or digital album. For example, Lori Burns coins the term “concept spectacle” to account for the assemblage of media materials comprising Coldplay's 2012 *Mylo Xyloto*. See Burns, “The Concept Album as Visual-Sonic-Textual Spectacle: The Transmedial Storyworld of Coldplay's *Mylo Xyloto*,” *IASPM@Journal* 6/2 (2016): 91-116. Beyoncé's visual albums, in my view, operate very much in this vein, asserting meanings via multiple parameters and across numerous disparate platforms.

<sup>36</sup> Gerard Genette's theory of paratexts has been usefully invoked by scholars in media theory, cultural theory, and fan studies to account for the production of meaning via a network of affiliated texts and media materials. See Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. From Genette's argument that paratexts act as “a threshold” functioning “at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it,” Jonathan Gray asserts that paratexts are both “‘distinct from’ and alike...intrinsically part of the text” and that paratexts play a constitutive role in shaping textual meaning. See Genette, 1; Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and*

*BEYONCÉ* as “not a concept album”—while immediately thereafter characterizing it as “designed to be consumed as a comprehensive audio/visual piece from top to bottom.” Further, the press release called the visual album “the antithesis of making singles,” referring to it as “a non-linear journey through the thoughts and visions of Beyoncé.”<sup>37</sup>

These characterizations were reinforced in a set of promotional videos posted to Beyoncé’s official Facebook page (and, subsequently, to her official VEVO account on YouTube) in the hours and days following the album release. Together, these small films comprised a kind of “documentary,” called *Self-Titled*. The first *Self-Titled* video situates the *BEYONCÉ* album project in a Beyoncé-specific synesthesia: “I *see* music; it’s more than just what I hear,” Beyoncé’s voice narrates over assorted rapid-fire shots of super-saturated imagery, and the opening synth pulses of the track “XO”.<sup>38</sup> The visual album is presented in this video, via Beyoncé’s voiceover, as an opportunity for fans to experience the music the way that the artist herself envisions it. The images in the videos are linked directly to Beyoncé herself:

When I’m connected to something, I immediately see a visual, or a series of images that are tied to a feeling or an emotion, a memory from my childhood, thoughts about life, or my dreams, or my fantasies. And they’re all connected to the music.<sup>39</sup>

The rollout of the *Self-Titled* documentary videos was one of a host of strategic corporate partnerships surrounding the surprise release. Specifically, the videos were mutually

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*Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 7. This chain of theorizing is frequently invoked to account for the meaning-making capacity of marketing material, trailers, and supplemental media, and has been used in studies of social media to interrogate the constitutive nature of platform-specific forms in mediating digital content.

<sup>37</sup> Parkwood Entertainment/Columbia Records, “BEYONCÉ Available Worldwide Now,” *PRNewswire*, 13 December 2013, <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/beyonce-available-worldwide-now-235687181.html>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>38</sup> @beyonceVEVO, “Beyoncé - Self-Titled, Part 1,” *YouTube*, 20 December 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-xY-MwDzIE>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

advantageous objects for both Beyoncé and the Facebook social media platform. For the purposes of the *BEYONCÉ* release, the videos were an outlet of sanctioned additional audiovisual data, an “authorized” source of contextualizing “behind-the-scenes” material that could be consumed and remediated by critics, bloggers, media and fans. At the same time, the videos functioned to create positive associations with Facebook’s new autoplaying video functionality, a feature—as mentioned in the previous chapter—that had been rolled out only a few months before, to largely-skeptical users wary of the disruptive audiovisual advertising tactic. The timely roll-out of the *Self-Titled* videos was part of a larger strategy by Facebook, positioning its most visible celebrity “users” as early demonstrators of the new autoplay functionality. In September of 2013, a tech blog reporting on the Facebook video feature’s testing stages even suggested Beyoncé by name, as a hypothetical part of this initial tactic: “But, this new feature [autoplaying video] will only work for those Facebook pages run by individuals, not from brands or companies. So Pages like Lady Gaga and Beyonce, not Ford, Microsoft, or Facebook.”<sup>40</sup> On December 11—just a day before the *BEYONCÉ* release and the publication of the first *Self-Titled* video—tech blogs began to report that the autoplay video feature had been launched to all Facebook mobile users, and that it was beginning to be launched for internet browser users as well.<sup>41</sup>

Even as they functioned to articulate a relationship between two corporate media giants—Facebook and Beyoncé—the *Self-Titled* videos stressed the album’s accessibility and lack of

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<sup>40</sup> Ken Yeung, “Facebook Testing Feature on its Mobile Apps that Auto-Plays Directly Uploaded Videos on News Feed,” *TheNextWeb.com*, posted 12 September 2013, <https://thenextweb.com/facebook/2013/09/12/facebook-testing-feature-on-its-mobile-apps-that-auto-plays-directly-uploaded-videos-on-news-feed/>. Accessed 1 July 2017.

<sup>41</sup> See Josh Constine, “Facebook Puts Its Web Feed in Motion with Auto-Playing Videos,” *TechCrunch*, 11 December 2013, <https://techcrunch.com/2013/12/11/facebook-autoplay-video/>. Accessed 3 March 2019.



mediation. The fifth video of the series opens by stating that “the glue that ties the record together is...honesty.”<sup>42</sup> Framing contemporary fragmented or distracted listening against her own recollection of the collective audiovisual experience of watching Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video at its premier on MTV in 1983, Beyoncé articulates the visual album release as a corrective to listening experiences of the present day. “It’s all about the single, and the hype. There’s so much that gets between the music and the artist and the fans,” Beyoncé’s voice narrates, “I just want it to come out when it’s ready, and from me to my fans.”

The press release’s somewhat enigmatic demarcation—that the visual album was *not* a concept album—might have been meant to effect a separation between the traditional generic affiliation of concept albums and that of *BEYONCÉ*.<sup>43</sup> As the above-cited literature on concept albums suggest, this format is usually deployed within the purview of genres setting themselves in opposition to pop, and the linked commodification of the radio and single format. As a visual album, *BEYONCÉ* rested comfortably in the world of pop, however, making no large-scale claims of crossover into the white-male-dominated genre spaces of rock, folk, alternative, indie, or country. Apart from the issue of genre, points of obvious divergence between the visual album and a “concept album” include the stated “non-linearity” of Beyoncé’s album—coupled with the lack of a clear, continuous narrative or story—as well as the relative (though not entire) independence of individual song/video units. An additional major component, of course, is *BEYONCÉ*’s *visuality*.

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<sup>42</sup> @beyonceVEVO, “Beyoncé - Self-Titled, Part 5,” *YouTube*, published 13 January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpxeeFMb1x8>. Accessed 11 February 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Drawing from the comparison made in the press release, I argue that the “visual album”/“concept album” distinction promotes “visual album” as a novel departure from the known format/genre of “concept album.” However, while the descriptor “visual album” was certainly thrown into prominence by the surprise release of *BEYONCÉ*, it was not a term *coined* by *BEYONCÉ*’s creators. I enumerate some of the preceding uses of the term “visual album” below.

The visual album comprises fourteen .m4a audio tracks and seventeen .m4v video tracks—.m4a and .m4v being proprietary Apple audio and video file formats.<sup>44</sup> The mismatch between audio and video track numbers is due to the splitting of a few single audio track songs to two videos, as well as the addition of a “bonus video,” “Grown Woman,” unaccompanied by a matching audio track. Complicating this potential confusion, each track, both audio and visual, is the result of a massive amount of collaboration; the album’s endnotes read like a “who’s who” of pop production, songwriting, and music video direction and editing. No component has fewer than two individuals credited; the writing credits alone distribute attribution for single songs among up to seven people. Luminaries involved include Justin Timberlake, Pharrell Williams, Sia, Timbaland, Frank Ocean, Hype Williams, Jake Nava, Terry Richardson, Jonas Åkerlund—the list is plentiful and star-studded. The only continuous presence in this ensemble is Beyoncé herself—she receives writing, producing, and directing credit for every song and every video on the album.<sup>45</sup>

This multitude of collaborators isn’t hidden by the album or its press materials—instead, the vast personnel become part of a cyclical network, centering and re-centering on Beyoncé herself. In the fifth Facebook promotional video, for example, various members of the album’s credited staff are introduced.<sup>46</sup> These figures then give testimonial in back-to-back shots, redirecting praise for the album, its authorial intent, and its artistic vision to the titular artist. Additionally, in spite of the wide array of collaborating voices and potentially-competing

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<sup>44</sup> These formats are related to the more common .mp4 format, but are designed to be more cooperative with DRM control technologies.

<sup>45</sup> “*BEYONCÉ* Album Credits,” Parkwood Entertainment, [http://www.beyonce.com/album/beyonce/?media\\_view=songs](http://www.beyonce.com/album/beyonce/?media_view=songs).

<sup>46</sup> @beyonceVEVO, “Beyoncé - Self-Titled, Part 5.”

visions, the album's audiovisual content coheres through a number of recurring visual, sonic, and narrative tropes that—again—largely serve to index and resound “Beyoncé” herself.

As stated above, the individual song/video units of the album are relatively independent. The album lacks a clear narrative, as well, across both individual songs and the album as a whole. Few of the album's musical structures are strikingly avant-garde; only a handful of the songs and videos push the boundaries of traditional pop song form and video convention. The song “Blow,” for example, goes into an extended bridge and never quite returns to its chorus—this move is visually mirrored by an abrupt switch from a dayglo roller rink to a smoky pink-lit alley, Beyoncé with a blowout lounging across a car. In the video version of the song “Rocket,” (one of the more explicitly sexual songs on the album) the traditional pop song form is cut short, ending abruptly after the shattered, shimmering vocals of the bridge's climax, so that the song more closely resembles the sex act that the video's imagery and editing suggest. Perhaps the most curious track on the album is “Ghost,” which consists of a rapped verse and sung chorus, followed by an electronic breakdown. The minimalist visuals on this video feature an unsmiling Beyoncé staring piercingly into the camera, reciting the song's lyrics while standing, lying down, dancing slowly—at times split into two or three Beyoncés, all eyeing the camera. The rapped verse's stream-of-consciousness lyrics, allegedly penned by collaborating musician Boots after an infuriating studio meeting, pointedly re-articulate the narrative of the release as a whole: “I'm climbing up the walls 'cuz all the shit I hear is boring/All the shit I do is boring/All these record labels boring.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See Jayson Greene, “Beyoncé's Muse,” *Pitchfork*, 21 January 2014, <http://pitchfork.com/features/article/9309-beyonces-muse/>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

While there's no clear narrative across the tracks or videos, there are parameters within which the visual album might seem to resonate. Repetitions of props, sets, and settings link together videos and songs otherwise unrelated through tone, genre, or (non-Beyoncé) personnel—the beaches in “Blue,” “Drunk in Love,” and “Mine,” or the mansion setting for “Haunted,” “Partition,” and “Jealous,” for example. The trophy wielded by defiant pageant-queen Beyoncé in “Pretty Hurts” gets dragged across the sand in “Drunk in Love,” and it shows back up in the sassy and light-hearted finale “Grown Woman.” [Figure 20] Symmetrically-framed closeups of women's faces center focus on rolling tongues, open mouths, and the consumption of candy, underpinning the theme of dense, agentive sensuality most on display in tracks like “Blow,” “Yoncé,” and “Rocket.” Shared, distinctive color schemes, too, facilitate trans-track connections—the neons of tracks like “Blow” and “XO” contrast sharply with the stark black and white of “Rocket,” “Drunk in Love,” and “Flawless,” as well as with the desaturated blacks, whites, browns and grays of tracks like “Ghost,” “Haunted,” and “Mine,” which are interspersed only with vibrant pops of red.



Figure 20: Stills featuring pageant trophies in the music videos for the BEYONCÉ tracks “Pretty Hurts,” “Drunk in Love,” and bonus track “Grown Woman”

Perhaps the most potent points of coherence are the visual and sonic markers that point directly to Beyoncé's life, offering tantalizing suggestions of audiovisual autobiography. [Figure 21] Her sister Solange shows up in the opening of the video "Blow," pedaling a lowrider bike. Beyoncé's husband Jay-Z raps the verse of "Drunk in Love" and dances with Beyoncé on the beach in that song's video. Jay-Z is also visible to the attentive viewer in various shots of "Partition," taking a spectator role for Beyoncé's exotic dancing—his onscreen presence enables readings of this video as a sexual fantasy safely enclosed within a monogamous marital union. Furthering the album as a familial enterprise, Beyoncé and Jay-Z's toddler Blue Ivy is featured, onscreen and as a vocal sample, in the track "Blue." Additionally, Beyoncé's past is enfolded into her present artistic endeavor. Former Destiny's Child bandmates Michelle Williams and Kelly Rowland appear alongside her in "Superpower"; Houston's third and fourth wards—neighborhoods in Beyoncé's hometown—recur variously across the album; home videos of Beyoncé's youth appear in sinister ("Haunted"), vengeful ("\*\*\*Flawless"), and jubilant ("Grown Woman") guises.

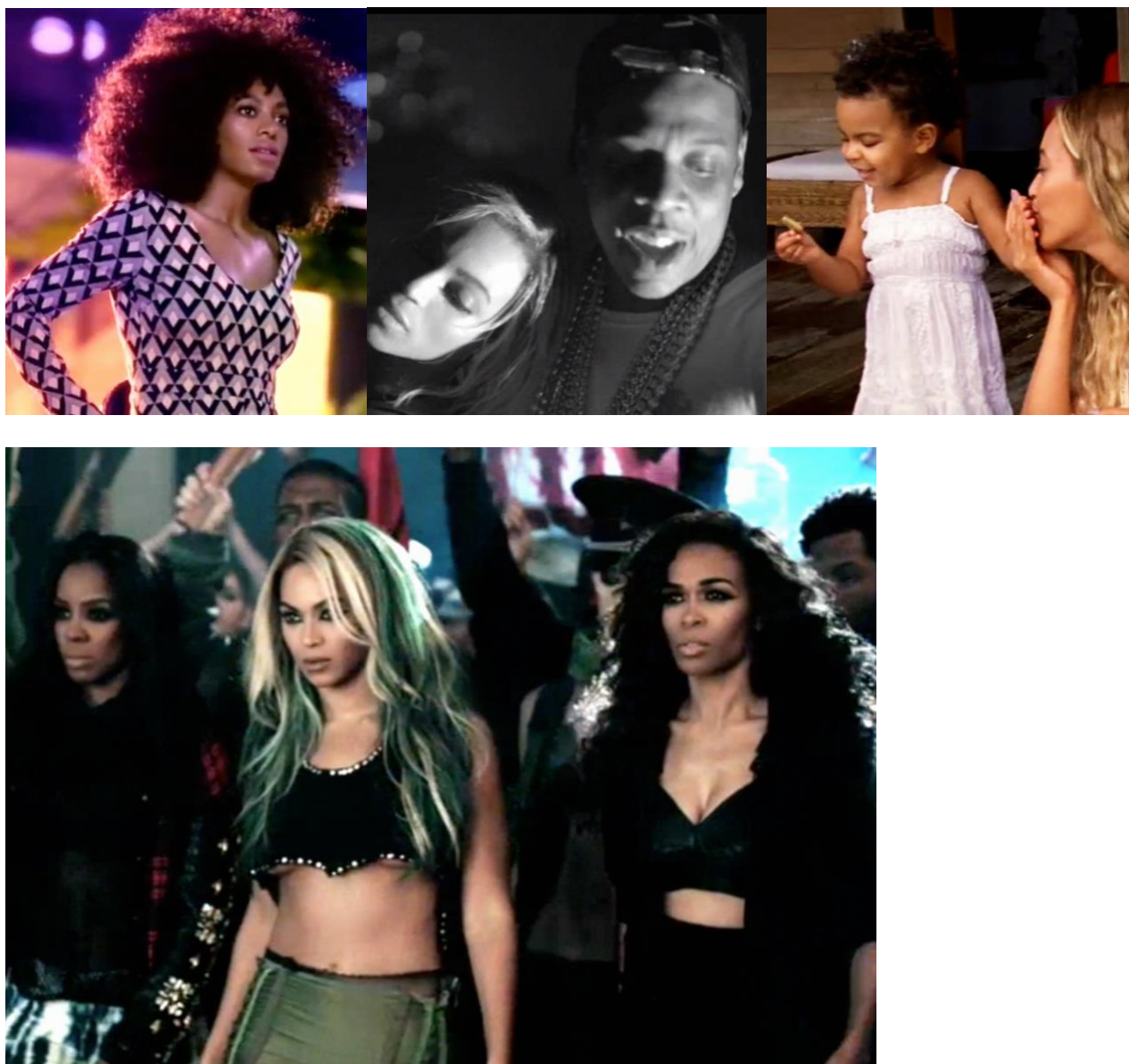


Figure 21: Images of Beyoncé's family and friends in *BEYONCÉ* music videos—sister Solange Knowles in “Blow,” husband Jay-Z in “Drunk in Love,” daughter Blue Ivy Carter in “Blue,” Destiny's Child groupmates Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams in “Superpower”

In terms of its sonic landscape, *BEYONCÉ* is perhaps more characterized by its eclecticism than by coherence. The songs on the visual album vary greatly in length, structure, and style—sometimes varying greatly *within* the course of a single song. The album's genre purview extends to encompass everything from the trap of “Drunk in Love” and “Flawless” to the funk of “Blow,” the pop ballads of “Pretty Hurts” and “Jealous” to the Dirty South/indie

chillwave hybrid of “No Angel.”<sup>48</sup> However, despite this breadth, some aural elements *do* link across a number of the tracks. Though the separation of tracks on and iTunes playlist is clear, sonic bleeds knit together tracks like “Yoncé” and “Partition”—Beyoncé’s repeated refrain of “‘Yoncé’ y’all on this mouth like liquor” is gradually layered over with the cries of reporters shouting questions in French (or French-accented English). These are muffled, then silenced, by a sonic slide recognizable as a car’s automatic window being raised: an index of a literal barrier that nonetheless blurs the division between two songs, while coyly foreshadowing “Partition”’s opening line: “Driver roll up the partition, please.” Throughout the album, sampled recorded speech interrupts and refracts Beyoncé’s sung lyrics: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TEDtalk on feminism (in “Flawless”), the NASA ground crew response to the Challenger explosion (in “XO”). Some of these samples are, again, pulled from and pointing back to Beyoncé’s life: the voice of Blue Ivy Carter in “Blue,” as well as footage from Beyoncé’s childhood performances, such as her ensemble Girl’s Tyme’s 1993 loss on the television show *Star Search*. A significant locus of coherence for the album, then, is **Beyoncé**—her person, her persona, her body, her biography. The visual album’s text and paratexts characterize this coherence as *real*, not representation—as “honesty.”

Allegedly offering up this “honest” access is a powerful invocation of what Stephen Shaviro theorizes as “allure”—an entity or object that

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<sup>48</sup> This genre omnivory aligns precisely with what Tom Johnson has theorized as a paradoxical rhetorical bifurcation around genre in the 2010s—rhetorics of genre being “dead” colliding with artists’ broad and proliferating engagement with genre multiplicity, both rhetorically and aesthetically. As Johnson, Robin James, and others have noted, access to (and recognition of) omnivorous genre performance has nonetheless been limited along lines of gender and race; white and male performers are more likely to receive accolades for inhabiting a variety of genre spaces. Beyoncé’s recognized success in this endeavor speaks to the scale of her recognition as a performer, and can perhaps also be linked to the maneuverings of cultural capital indexed in the connection of the “visual album” to the “concept album.” See Johnson, “Analyzing Genre in Post-Millennial Popular Music,” PhD diss., City University of New York, 2018, 103, 175; James, “Is the Post- in Post-Identity the Post- in Post-Genre?” *Popular Music* 36/1 (2017): 21-32.



insinuates the presence of a hidden, deeper level of existence...explicitly *calls attention* to the fact that it is something more than, and other than, the bundle of qualities that it presents to me...When a pop star or celebrity allures me, this means that he or she is someone to whom I respond in the mode of intimacy, even though I am not, and cannot ever be, actually intimate with him or her.<sup>49</sup>

A number of scholars have compellingly suggested ways in which Beyoncé, throughout her career, has navigated the binds of respectability and sexual availability that tend to stand as the limited roles available to black women, particularly in contexts of American audiovisual popular culture, and music video in particular. Aisha Durham's "Check On It" argues that Beyoncé's successful emergence from girl-group member to solo diva superstar has hinged on virtuosic performance of multiple musical and visual personae, and across a range of class sensibilities.<sup>50</sup> Robin James and Regina Bradley have, along similar lines, also suggested ways in which sound might trouble visual information in music video, offering a route through which black female performers might evade or undercut stereotyped roles or objectification.

In this album, Beyoncé eschews former reliance on explicit alter ego figures (like "Sasha Fierce" of Beyoncé's third album), performing a multiplicity of roles—performer, activist, seductress, mother, wife—in and as a singular figure, herself. Consolidating the album around identity-as-brand allowed for a seamless transduction—support of Beyoncé to purchase of *BEYONCÉ*. Further, the synchrony of the album's title, its subject matter, and its central performer—all aligning to one singular locus—rendered an ideal viral object, optimized for visibility, singularity, searchability, trend-ability:

#BEYONCÉ

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<sup>49</sup> Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Zero Books, 2009) 9-10. Emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> Aisha Durham, "Check On It," *Feminist Media Studies* 12:1 (2012): 35-49.

## Precedenting the “Unprecedented Strategic Move”

The viral launch of *BEYONCÉ* made use of an extant viral apparatus, putting the technicities of the feed and the techniques of viral participation to work in a potent shared act of consumption. It is important to stress, however, that this event does not constitute as dramatic a rupture from extant music industry practices as a December 13, 2013 Twitterscape might have led one to believe. For example, a press release announcing the album, issued jointly by Parkwood Entertainment (the entertainment company founded by Beyoncé) and Columbia Records, would seem to be precisely the kind of form to be pushed into obsolescence in the non-standard, viral release of *BEYONCÉ*.<sup>51</sup> This, however, was entirely *not* the case. Instead, the press release, as readily available and easily sharable data, became a central site of information for the discourse circulating around *BEYONCÉ*.

One crucial form in this apparatus is that which I term the “viral article”: an online document situated somewhere between a traditional journalistic article and a lorem ipsum placeholder in digital space. Produced and published by outlets along a spectrum from respected news platforms to amateur blogs, these viral articles’ timeliness and mere existence far outvalued their content—often little more than a flashy headline, an embedded video file or set of pictures, and a few lines of text, the viral article is meant to function largely as a circulatable module, something that could be posted to a media outlet’s various social media feeds, with a catchy photo and a headline containing the trending subject—and could from there capture some precious amount of viral attention. Within the article, affording the flip side of the process, simple iconic “buttons” at the edge of the text of each of these shallow glosses provided coded

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<sup>51</sup> Parkwood Entertainment/Columbia Records, “BEYONCÉ Available Worldwide Now.”

“hooks” to the popular feed-based social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Google+). Viewers of these articles were thereby enabled to share their participation in the phenomenon with a minimum of effort—a few clicks or taps. Friends or followers of that viewer would then have the possibility of encountering the link to *that outlet’s* article in the flood of feed content, and would possibly click through to its page, rather than to any other site’s rendering of (essentially) the same information. Additionally, alongside the minimal content, viral articles’ texts often directed viewers to accompanying comment forums, located below the body of the article in screen space. If viewers “chimed in,” or “added their voice,” stating a position either supportive of or antagonistic towards the article’s subject matter, these comments functioned as forms of engagement that both linked the viewer to the page (any repeated viewings transducing to capital through monetized page views) and generated activity that would raise the page’s “relevance”—i.e., visibility, or viral legibility—in search metrics on engines like Google or Bing.<sup>52</sup>

For the surprise album launch, the Parkwood/Columbia press release served as vital fodder for the quick creation of these viral articles. An announcement by the *London Evening Standard*, published at 2:52 GMT on December 13, proves exemplary in this regard.<sup>53</sup> The piece used a striking quote from the *BEYONCÉ* press release—“I see music”—as its headline, and its

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<sup>52</sup> Additionally, by the mid 2010s, commenting would often have been linked to a public social media profile like Facebook. Such a feature, a “plug-in” to a blog or media outlet’s page, would allow a user’s comment on an article or blog post to be directly linked to their Facebook profile. Depending on a user’s settings, a comment on a non-Facebook site could be published to Facebook, on behalf of the user, making that article newly visible on a platform with a potentially much higher number of viewers. See, for example Vadim Lavrusik, “Facebook Releases Robust Updates to Its Comments Plugin,” *Mashable*, 11 March 2011, <https://mashable.com/2011/03/01/facebook-comments-plugin/#DlFo1rXTWaqB>. Accessed 11 March 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Alistair Foster, “I See Music, Says Beyoncé as She Releases New Album and 17 Videos,” *Evening Standard*, 13 December 2013, 2:52pm, <http://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/celebrity-news/i-see-music-says-beyonc-as-she-releases-new-album-and-17-videos-9002398.html>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

content was drawn almost entirely from the release.<sup>54</sup> Of the *Standard* article's 366 words, over 300 of them gloss material in the press release; 190 of the words comprise direct quotations. Other viral articles from sources as disparate as *The Wall Street Journal* blog, *Entertainment Weekly's Music Mix*, and online pop culture aggregates like *wow247.com* and *hypable.com* were similarly shot through with citations of the Parkwood/Columbia release—and were similarly limited in their unique contributions of information or opinion.<sup>55</sup> The text of the release was, within this apparatus, *more*, rather than less, central to the emergent discourse surrounding the album. The narrative that the album's release constituted an “unprecedented strategic move” allowing “music fans to be the first to listen, view, engage and form their own opinions void of any middleman” spread widely, precisely *through* the middleman of the release, and its subsequent ventriloquization in the output of time-crunched viral article writers.

Additionally, the *BEYONCÉ* launch was not thoroughly unprecedented. While the surprise release catapulted the term “visual album” into broad usage, the creators of *BEYONCÉ* innovated neither the name nor the concept. A *Film School Rejects* blog post from August 2012 chronicled the visual album format as an “increasingly prevalent” hybrid, noting its tendency towards narrative and its opposition to the fragmentary listening practices encouraged by iTunes

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<sup>54</sup> This line was also the opening to the first of the series of behind-the-scenes promotional videos, mentioned above.

<sup>55</sup> See Lyneka Little, “Beyoncé Surprises Fans With Sudden Release of New ‘Visual Album’,” *The Wall Street Journal Speakeasy Blog*, 13 December 2013, 7:49am, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2013/12/13/beyonce-surprises-fans-with-sudden-release-of-new-visual-album/>. Accessed 3 March 2019; “Beyoncé’s Brand New Album - Stream Samples of all the Songs and Videos Here,” *EW.com*, posted 13 December 13, 2013, 11:19am, <http://music-mix.ew.com/2013/12/13/beyonce-new-album-videos-songs/>. Accessed 3 March 2019; Nick Mitchell, “Beyoncé Surprises Everyone with 14-Track ‘Visual Album’,” *Wow247.com*, 13 December 2013, <http://www.wow247.co.uk/blog/2013/12/13/beyonce-surprise-album-72829/>. Accessed 3 March 2019; Andrew Sims, “Beyoncé Reveals Why She Surprised the World with New Album: ‘I am Bored’,” *Hypable.com*, posted 13 December 2013, 10:20am, <http://www.hypable.com/2013/12/13/beyonce-new-album-singer-talks-about-project/>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

and streaming services, and describing it as “designed to exist exclusively through web distribution.”<sup>56</sup> Despite a relatively ambitious title—“How Visual Albums Are Changing the Way We Think of Movies and Music Videos”—the blog post is largely just an annotated list of recent large-scale audiovisual projects by established bands and artists. Although cinematic adaptations of The Beatles’ *A Hard Day’s Night*, The Who’s *Tommy*, and Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* are given as historical precedents, the article focuses on exemplars from 2010-2012: Kanye West’s *Runaway* (2010), Animal Collective’s *ODDSAC* (2010), TV on the Radio’s *Nine Types of Light* (2011), and Dirty Projectors’ *Hi Custodian* (2012).<sup>57</sup>

The *Film School Rejects* blog credits the 2010 Animal Collective release *ODDSAC* with the coinage of “visual album” as a term.<sup>58</sup> The project, first announced in 2006, premiered after years of collaboration between the indie band and director Danny Perez. Leading up to and after its release, *ODDSAC* was described interchangeably as a “visual record” and “visual album”; in

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<sup>56</sup> Landon Palmer, “How Visual Albums Are Changing the Way We Think of Movies and Music Videos,” *FilmSchoolRejects*, 21 August 2012, <https://filmschoolrejects.com/how-visual-albums-are-changing-the-way-we-think-of-movies-and-music-videos-db2620501765/>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>57</sup> In the limited number of discussions of “visual albums” that occur in music journalism prior to the *BEYONCÉ* release (many of which deal with Animal Collective’s *ODDSAC*), *Tommy* and *The Wall* are frequently cited as the go-to historical antecedents for the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century form. See, for example Mark Beaumont, “Can You Decipher Animal Collective’s Visual Album *ODDSAC*?” *The Guardian*, 10 May 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2010/may/10/animal-collective-oddsac>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>58</sup> A few earlier usages of the term dispute this claim, but do seem to be outliers to any kind of “visual album” mainstream practice. In 2009, *The New York Times*’ *Media Decoder* blog gave a skeptical account of a hybrid media experiment setting a children’s album to video (Brooks Barnes, “Warner Brothers Experiments, Digitally, With a ‘Visual Album’,” *MediaDecoder*, 1 September 2009, [https://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/warner-brothers-experiments-digitally-with-a-visual-album/?\\_r=0](https://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/warner-brothers-experiments-digitally-with-a-visual-album/?_r=0). Accessed 3 March 2019) and an even earlier article expands the visual album’s purview outside of web media, referring to new experiments in DVD content (Peter M. Nichols, “HOME VIDEO; DVD’s Offering Full Concerts,” *The New York Times*, 18 October 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/18/movies/home-video-dvd-s-offering-full-concerts.html>. Accessed 3 March 2019). These objects are framed with skepticism and ambivalence in the articles which report on them; they’re treated as novelties either doomed to failure, or poised to establish a new way forward in multimedia entertainment practices. I view them—and the reporting surrounding them—more as evidence of the markedness of audiovisuality in the 2000s and 2010s, the capacity of a large-scale audiovisual project to evoke specialness, to carry indications of something new and meaningful.

its formal and material dissemination it was treated as a film, premiering at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and made available afterwards only as a DVD. Described by its creators as “a new synthesis of music and film” *ODDSAC* was, according to director Perez “meant to be an open-ended operation of audio-video synthesis, the passing back and forth of visuals and sound so that each would inform the other and create an organic structure.”<sup>59</sup> *ODDSAC* features a loose narrative, or at least traceable characters—a young girl in a house, a mysterious hooded figure moving through a field, a sad vampire who, at the visual album’s climax, attacks a family on a camping trip. These characters inhabit a strange, psychedelic filmic world; quick, jagged edits juxtapose unrelated visual material, images of people or nature emerge out of crunching static, swirl into fractal patterns in bright colors. There are only a few clear moments of “song” in the hourlong album; overall its soundtrack is largely a fluid shift through electronic sounds and textures—pings and chirps, drones and claxons, occasional grunts and screams that blur the line between human and machine. The “visual album” of Perez and Animal Collective was produced and designed for consumption by a niche audience, notching into the approachable avant-gardism of 2000s indie music. Its audiovisual idiom and premiere at the Sundance festival suggest the novel format’s capacity to signify heightened status, a project of “art” surpassing mundane single or album releases.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See “ODDSAC - A Visual Album by Animal Collective and Danny Perez Screenings Announced,” *DominoRecordCo*, 27 April 2010, <http://www.dominorecordco.com/uk/news/27-04-10/oddsac---a-visual-album-by-animal-collective-and-danny-perez-screenings-announced/>; Matthew Solarski, “Hey, It’s an Animal Farm Collective Film Project Quasi-Update,” *Pitchfork*, 4 December 2008, <http://pitchfork.com/news/34189-hey-its-an-animal-collective-film-project-quasi-update/>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>60</sup> For example, in Mark Beaumont’s response to *ODDSAC* in *The Guardian* music blog, cited above, the author prefaces his close reading of the visual album by acknowledging: “It’s undoubtedly “art”, but how to fathom the meaning of such a mind-frazzling piece full of vampire monks, demonic fakirs and lengthy episodes of trance-inducing pattern loops?” (Beaumont, “Can you decipher Animal Collective’s visual album *ODDSAC*?”)

In addition to this small number of visual album precursors, *BEYONCÉ* also followed in a lineage of attention-garnering novel (though not universally successful or lucrative) music-release mechanisms, predicated on and working through the affordances of ubiquitous digital media. Responding explicitly to the perceived abuses of corporate structures in the music industry, Radiohead's 2007 *In Rainbows* was first made available as a digital download via a pay-what-you-want model.<sup>61</sup> In her work on the group, Tatom Letts frames this move as part of a broader ambivalence of the band towards the mechanics of capitalist consumption, evidenced in both their musical output and the public statements of Radiohead's members; when asked about the group's departure from their record label EMI in 2003, Thom Yorke, Radiohead's lead singer and principal songwriter, told *Time* that he viewed labels as irrelevant and that it "would give us some perverse pleasure to say 'F[uck] you' to this decaying business model."<sup>62</sup> The digital release of *In Rainbows* made seemingly-intuitive use of the means by which Radiohead fans had already begun to access and consume music, and band members found the medium's temporality appealing. Recalling the release, bassist Colin Greenwood suggested:

The other attraction for us was the conjuring up of an event, a way of marking our releases and performances as special, unique times. The internet makes it easier for everything to be live, and that's what we do.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Marc Bourreau, Pinar Doğan, and Sounman Hong discuss the efficacy of this novel distribution method and pricing model (and its limitations) in "Making Money by Giving It for Free: Radiohead's Pre-Release Strategy for *In Rainbows*," *Information Economics and Policy* 32 (September 2015): 77-93.

<sup>62</sup> Tatom Letts, *Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album*, 2-3; Josh Tyrangiel, "Radiohead Says: Pay What You Want," *Time*, 1 October 2007, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1666973,00.html>. Accessed 11 February 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Colin Greenwood, "Radiohead's Colin Greenwood: Set Yourself Free," *Index on Censorship Magazine*, 13 September 2010, <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2010/09/radiohead-copyright-freespeech-music/>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

Later alternative releases more explicitly leveraged the ecosystem of ubiquitous digital devices. In 2013, both Jay-Z's album *Magna Carta Holy Grail* and Bob Dylan's *Bob Dylan Bootlegs* were released as high-profile album-apps—in the case of *Magna Carta Holy Grail*, before being released as a physical album.<sup>64</sup> Novel integrations of media platforms with single songs were created, as well. Pharrell Williams's song "Happy" was released on November 21, 2013, in the form of a website, containing only a sleekly-designed "24-hour video." The video consisted of hundreds of loops of the four-minute song, each accompanied by visuals of a different individual (anonymous or celebrity), dancing down streets and through cityscapes to the song. And, in perhaps the closest precedent for the *BEYONCÉ* launch, David Bowie's song "Where are We Now?"—which would emerge as the first single from his 2013 album *The Next Day*—was made quietly available in the iTunes store for purchase on Bowie's 66<sup>th</sup> birthday: January 8, 2013.

Of these experimental formats, maneuvers, releases, and partnerships, however, the 2007 Radiohead project comprises an important distinction from the other items enumerated above. While Radiohead framed its strategy explicitly *against* corporate regimes profiteering from artistic labor, the other ventures synergistically the artists and their products with corporate (specifically, technological) affiliates—*Magna Carta Holy Grail* with Samsung, *Bob Dylan Bootlegs* with Sony and Columbia Records, Bowie's "Where Are We Now?" in exclusivity with iTunes. In a landscape of cheap digital downloads, ubiquitous high-speed streaming, and piracy, such strategies functioned to recoup money through limiting access, or re-defining modes of

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<sup>64</sup> See James C. McKinley Jr., "Jay-Z Teams Up With Samsung to Release New Album," *The New York Times Arts Beat*, 17 June 2013, 11:45am, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/17/jay-z-teams-up-with-samsung-to-release-new-album/>. Accessed 3 March 2019; William Gruger, "Bob Dylan Bootlegs App Offers Mobile Experience for the Bard's Superfans," *Billboard*, 9 October 2013, 11:37am, <http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/branding/5748197/bob-dylan-bootlegs-app-offers-mobile-experience-for-the-bards>. Accessed 3 March 2019.



access that profited artists more directly and lucratively than the small returns from emerging forms of musical consumption. For music-consuming fans, however, many of these novel releases presented a problem of convenience—by the 2010s, typical habits and pathways of listening favored listening to music on a small number of platforms with large libraries and flexible, rather than stringent, relationships to cost and copyright. Downloading an app for playing a single album did not, in many cases, successfully integrate into extant habits of everyday digital use. Additionally, many of these latter projects were met with discomfiture by the fans of these artists, who harangued them with allegations of having “sold out.”<sup>65</sup>

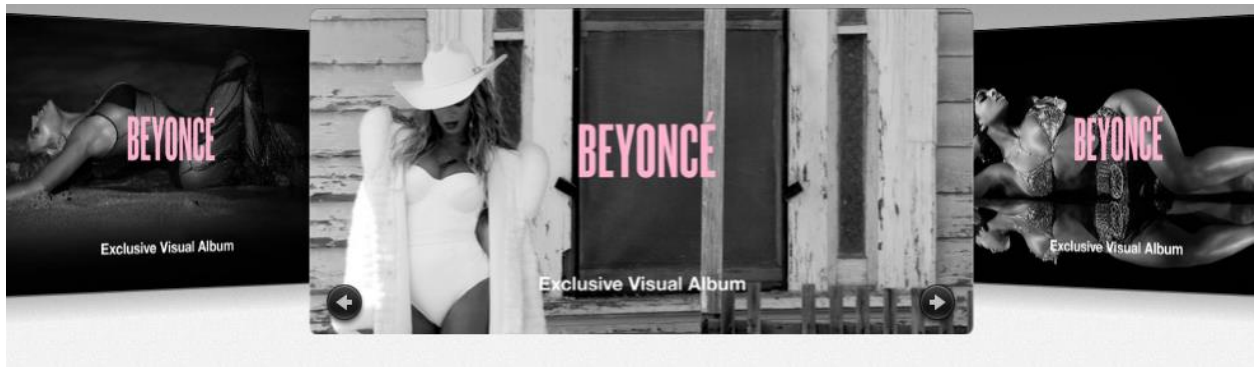
Such experimentation actually set quite a number of precedents for *BEYONCÉ*’s celebratedly unorthodox release, and provided a number of case studies and pitfalls to be avoided.<sup>66</sup> The visual album was released in corporate partnership with iTunes, a major media superpower, and release of physical copies of the album postdated the digital release by a full week. As mentioned above, the album’s fourteen .m4a sound files and eighteen .m4v video files

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<sup>65</sup> For example, Connor Simpson, writing for *The Wire*, compiled a representative summary of tweets making just such arguments, ultimately arguing that these expressions of being “kind of grossed out by this marriage of art with corporate America” were out of line, considering Jay-Z’s past corporate partnerships. Simpson, “The Backlash to Jay-Z’s Samsung Deal is Overblown,” *The Wire*, June 17, 2013, 9:13am. <http://www.thewire.com/entertainment/2013/06/backlash-jay-zs-samsung-deal-overblown/66293/>. Accessed 2 March 2017.

<sup>66</sup> The *BEYONCÉ* release was precedented, and it set a difficult-to-follow precedent itself. Particularly noteworthy as a *failed* corporate-partnership surprise release was Irish rock band *U2*’s release of its 2014 album *Songs of Innocence*. Partnering with Apple, the band launched the album at the tech corporation’s yearly product launch; simultaneously the album was imported into the iTunes library of every user with an iTunes Store account. Apple CEO Tim Cook touted the mass digital drop as “the largest album release of all time,” reaching some 500 million customers. See Ben Sisario, “For U2 and Apple, a Shrewd Marketing Partnership,” *The New York Times*, 9 September 2014, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/10/business/media/u2-appears-at-apple-event-and-songs-of-innocence-appears-free-on-itunes.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/10/business/media/u2-appears-at-apple-event-and-songs-of-innocence-appears-free-on-itunes.html?_r=0). The response to this approach was largely negative, however; users complained across social media, journalists likened the album release to spam e-mails or junk mail, and online searches for how to delete the album spiked. The issue raised in this case seemed to be the broaching of an imagined zone of privacy—the assumption that one’s iTunes library constituted a closed, personal archive. In part, the failure of the U2 release occurred because it demonstrated the unpleasant and—to many—previously unconsidered reality of Apple’s control over the platform, and the platform’s built-in affordances for surveillance, manipulation, and alteration of individual users’ content.

were initially only purchasable as a whole (rather than as single tracks) via the iTunes store, at a relatively pricey \$15.99. The iTunes-exclusive release functioned along clearly mutually agreeable terms for both involved parties: as the album could only be purchased through the iTunes store, the visual “real estate” of the iTunes store was entirely comprised of *BEYONCÉ* imagery—while the iTunes store platform would normally have appeared to users with a rotating “banner” of different featured artists, followed by static “new releases” suggestions below, the December 13, 2013 design of the store featured a banner of rotating promotional images for *BEYONCÉ*, largely focused on the artist herself. Even the digital store’s typical light-grey color scheme was usurped by a darker palette of charcoal and black, offset by light pink—the color palette consistent with the album’s branding. [Figure 22]



*Figure 22: iTunes digital store imagery from December 13, 2013*

The exclusivity of this partnership, and its initial material limitations, netted *BEYONCÉ* (and Beyoncé) a number of temporary corporate foes, Amazon and Target key among them. Both retailers announced, in the wake of the album’s release, a corporate refusal to stock the physical album for purchase. The record-breaking success of *BEYONCÉ*’s digital download sales showed the loss of corporate friendship to have been an acceptable risk; a week later, Beyoncé

smilingly handed out copies of her album—in compact disc form—at locations of the non-embargoing retailer Wal-Mart.<sup>67</sup>

The December 13<sup>th</sup> release, then, was in many ways far less of a radical departure from industry norms than the surrounding furor made it seem. The questions raised in a July 2013 *MTV.com* article are telling. “What’s Going On With Beyonce’s Album?” the article’s title implored, sounding a refrain familiar by then among Beyoncé fans. Beyoncé, the article stated:

has spent the majority of 2013 in full-blown promotion mode, performing at the Super Bowl, debuting a documentary [*Life is But a Dream*], appearing in (at least) three high-profile ad campaigns [for H&M and Pepsi], premiering new songs and, oh yeah, launching a world tour [the *Mrs. Carter World Tour*]. The only question seems to be: Just *what* is she promoting?<sup>68</sup>

On December 13, at midnight, the answer became immediately, virally clear. *BEYONCÉ* came equipped with nearly all of the trappings of a traditional album launch—major corporate partnerships, an ongoing tour, performance at high-profile televised events. The only thing it lacked, from this standard marketing apparatus, was the announcement of a release date. Ultimately, the *MTV.com* article received its answer, some months later, in the form of an Instagram post: Surprise!

### Conclusion: Getting in Formation

It’s clear that Beyoncé’s subsequent visual album release—2016’s *Lemonade*—built upon the 2013 release as a precedent in a number of ways. As a visual album, *Lemonade* knitted

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<sup>67</sup> Rachel Maresca, “Beyonce Surprises Fans at Walmart, Gifts Shoppers with Over \$37, 000 in Gift Cards,” *New York Daily News*, 21 December 2013, 10:13am, <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/gossip/beyonce-surprises-fans-walmart-gifts-37-000-worth-gift-cards-article-1.1554815>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

<sup>68</sup> James Montgomery, “What’s Going On with Beyonce’s Album?” *MTV.com*, posted 26 July 2013, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1711376/beyonce-album-update/>. Accessed 3 March 2019.

twelve songs into an hourlong film, featuring numerous audiovisual citations and collaborations with a wide array of personnel. Further, *Lemonade* built on the autobiographical branding promoted by *BEYONCÉ*, aestheticizing Beyoncé's reactions to her husband Jay-Z's infidelity. More broadly, *Lemonade* extended beyond the 2013 album's pop-feminist politics, expressly and unapologetically centering around images, narratives, and histories of black southern womanhood.

Perhaps less explicitly, the self-titled album release served as a proving ground in leveraging corporate partnerships. In the wake of *BEYONCÉ*, *Lemonade* premiered (as an announced performance, but a surprise album release) in a live primetime special on premium cable network HBO. This premier followed close on the heels of the debut of Beyoncé's Ivy Park activewear line, and the album was initially accessible only via Tidal—a streaming music service co-owned and recently launched by various music industry luminaries, among them Beyoncé and Jay-Z.

The production and release of the *Lemonade* visual album built on *BEYONCÉ* as a model—just as the *BEYONCÉ* release leveraged an extant assemblage of viral techniques to augment, rather than overcode, pre-existing industry logics, strategies, and forms. Rather than a chaotic, spontaneous digital “virality,” the viral techniques of the late-2013 social media terrain—an interplay of engaged bodies, social behaviors, and technological interfaces—were so engrained and predictable that recouping the expense of such a large-scale media endeavor as *BEYONCÉ* could be reliably assured. But this success also relied upon the considerable scale of Beyoncé's fame, the avidness of her fan base, and her savvy deployment of those traditional music industry strategies. In late 2013, these were virtuosically combined in a potent alchemy that seemed, for a moment, to stop the world.

## EPILOGUE: MEGAPHONES, ECHO CHAMBERS, AND GRABBING ‘EM BY THE PUSSY

On October 7, 2016, in the run-up to the 2016 United States Presidential election, an anonymous source provided *Washington Post* reporter David Fahrenthold with a leaked file of Donald Trump speaking to *Access Hollywood* reporter Billy Bush in 2005.<sup>1</sup>

[About Bush’s former co-star, Nancy O’Dell] I moved on her, and I failed. I’ll admit it.

I did try and fuck her. She was married.

And I moved on her very heavily. In fact, I took her out furniture shopping. She wanted to get some furniture. I said, “I’ll show you where they have some nice furniture.” I took her out furniture—I moved on her like a bitch. But I couldn’t get there. And she was married. Then all of a sudden I see her, she’s now got the big phony tits and everything. She’s totally changed her look.

Fahrenthold and the *Post* published the leaked footage on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup>, and by that evening, several other major news outlets had also aired, circulated, and reported on the footage. The report in the *Post* would shortly become the most concurrently viewed article in the history of outlet’s website with more than 100,000 simultaneous readers; traffic to the story and its audio contents would crash the newspaper’s servers.<sup>2</sup>

[About Trump’s colleague and costar Arianne Zucker] I better use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know I’m automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything.

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<sup>1</sup> David A. Fahrenthold, “Trump recorded having extremely lewd conversation about women in 2005,” *The Washington Post*, 7 October 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d1509b3b6955](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html?utm_term=.d1509b3b6955). Accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Farhi, “A Caller had a Lewd Tape of Donald Trump. Then the Race to Break the Story was On,” *The Washington Post*, 7 October 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-caller-had-a-lewd-tape-of-donald-trump-then-the-race-was-on/2016/10/07/31d74714-8ce5-11e6-875e-2c1bfe943b66\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.6595f7129520](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-caller-had-a-lewd-tape-of-donald-trump-then-the-race-was-on/2016/10/07/31d74714-8ce5-11e6-875e-2c1bfe943b66_story.html?utm_term=.6595f7129520). Accessed 2 February 2019.

In the recordings—audio recorded by hot microphones before an interview and soap opera cameo—the 2016 Presidential candidate was clearly audible in his articulation of the privileges of a certain status of rich white male celebrity—that is, the ability to force himself on any woman of his choosing without fear of any meaningful repercussions. The circulation of this material very much comprised viral musicking—virality of a sordid, horrifying, or gleeful sort. While supporters of then-candidate Trump listened to the audio as “ancient history” and “locker room talk,” his detractors circulated the audio as seemingly incontrovertible evidence of the candidate’s misogyny, his lack of character, and his unfitness for high office. Some heard the file more pointedly as a literal admission to crimes of sexual assault. This latter strain of viral musicking—the repeated, unavoidable circulation of this sonic artifact—was imagined to be an unsurpassable obstacle to the Presidency. Surely collective listening to this audio footage would keep Donald Trump from being elected in 2016.

It did not.

It is notable, I think, and telling that this audio clip did not receive the kind of musicking treatment that many of the objects in this dissertation were subjected to. The sound file was not widely circulated in any remixed or otherwise cleverly musicalized form—at least not in major media coverage of the leaked file as sonic event or sonic evidence.<sup>3</sup> Other musicking responses

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<sup>3</sup> There are indeed some remixed versions, circulated largely on platforms and among networks highly supportive of President Trump. The comments on these videos are filled with delighted rancor directed towards members of any identity category outside of straight white cisgender men, though unadulterated, sometimes violent misogyny (coupled with expressions of adulation towards President Trump) are the most prevalent variety of comment—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the theme of the remixed original.

By a considerable order of magnitude, these videos received fewer views than the other viral objects I’ve discussed thus far, and were much less present in journalistic discourse surrounding the leak; they did not even circulate as negative-affect-fueled “clickbait” so prevalent in the mid-2010s digital media ecosystem.

to Trump's campaign did circulate, though. On the side *for* him, chants and songs made use of his pithy campaign slogans: "Make America Great Again," "Build the Wall," "Lock her up!" On the side opposing Trump were derogatory or critical instances of musicking, still often centering around his words and speech: for instance, the widely-shared compilation of Trump saying the word "China."<sup>4</sup>

This latter object is reminiscent of Lenka Clayton's 2002 sound and video artwork "Qaeda Quality Question Quickly Quickly Quiet," in which the artist manipulated a recording of President George W. Bush's so-called "Axis of Evil" State of the Union address, re-arranging and playing every word of the address in alphabetical order.<sup>5</sup> The resulting video presented mundane and ridiculous moments, like cascades of articles or pronouns. These were juxtaposed with potent moments of affect, poetry—chilling concatenations of sound and meaning, like the series of words comprising the work's title. Contemporary critics have read this work of Clayton's as "naive" or "simple" in its method, but potentially profound in its meaning and comprehension. "Qaeda Quality Question Quickly Quickly Quiet," (or "QQQQQQ") offers interpretations of the speech that *excerpt* speech from rhetoric, suggestive of the distance between words and meaning, speech and action, expedient political claims and truth. Clayton's method also aesthetically foreshadowed, in a way, methods of distant reading that were, at the time of her composition, nascent digital interventions into academic study of the humanities.

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<sup>4</sup> One iteration of this can be found at @HuffPost Entertainment, "Donald Trump Says 'China'," *YouTube.com*, uploaded 28 August 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDrfE9I8\\_hs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDrfE9I8_hs). Accessed 13 February 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See Lenka Clayton, "Qaeda Quality Question Quickly Quickly Quiet," *Lenkaclayton.com*, <http://www.lenkaclayton.com/qaeda-quality-question-quickly-quickly-quiet/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.

But Clayton's method also aesthetically and formally foreshadowed methods that would comprise goofy amateur practices—comprised of splicing, reordering, pitch-shifting, and other digital manipulations, made possible through now-widely-accessible software packages, or even apps. To me, the resonances between the “China” remix and “QQQQQQ” suggest lines of convergence between amateur, vernacular viral products and avant-garde experimental art. I envision a continuum spanning sound art like Alvin Lucier's now-canonic 1969 “I am Sitting in a Room,” to the online proliferation of formula-bound, iterative humor videos like 2016's “The Entire Bee Movie but Every Time They Say Bee it Gets Faster.”<sup>6</sup> Across this span of productions, creators engage technological manipulation as both tool, technique, and aesthetic—audiences of these pieces listen to their looping or mismatched or altered sonic material as aesthetic artifacts of technological (rather than human) temporality. The pieces disrupt semantics, rhetoric, narrative; in their place they forward sound and affect—humor, or dread, or both.

It is possible that the *Access Hollywood* recording didn't circulate in musicalized form because the it was understood to be less “potentially musical” than the other objects I've mentioned here. Perhaps, unlike other musical or not-yet-musical objects circulating in recent political discourse, there was nothing that musicalizing the object of the leaked tape could *accomplish* for the purposes of either side. Music didn't work as the vector, for some reason—perhaps because the sonic object itself was catchy enough on its own. It is certainly true that, “musical” or not, the recording was deeply incorporated into (and analyzed *as*) part of debates surrounding the would-be President, as well as broader societal skirmishes concerning misogyny,

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<sup>6</sup> Alvin Lucier, *I am sitting in a room*, Lovely Music, Ltd., 1981; @Avoid at All Costs, “The entire bee movie but every time they say bee it gets faster,” *YouTube.com*, 17 November 2016. Accessed via Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20161231034742/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6iN6VTL7v8&feature=youtu.be>. Accessed 12 February 2019.



sexual violence, misapplications of power, racist and classist oppression, and the unimpeachability of American white masculinity in the face of all odds. But it's worth noting, too, that the circulation of this sound file occurred across very much the same circuit and pathways that I have tracked, particularly through the final chapters of this dissertation. Only, its viral musicking also spilled offline in some novel, somewhat spectacular ways. The sonic material of the leaked tape was transformed into visual material in protest signs; it was ironically remixed and battered against in the music and sound of protest chants up and down New York City's Fifth Avenue and on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in January of 2017.

### **Studying Internet Musicking, Then and Now**

When I proposed this dissertation in early 2015, I conceived of Beyoncé's 2013 album release as the culmination of the trajectory I'd been tracking—the amateur cat videos and other dispersed viral “accidents” of the early internet having been completely corralled into the limited platforms and pathways that the visual album release exploited. I imagined that the mechanisms of viral musicking that I had just begun to theorize had reached their apotheosis in Beyoncé's surprise album release—a massive corporate endeavor with huge financial stakes, achieved through mass participation, fan labor, algorithmic curation, and predictable circuits and genres of discursive remediation. This, it turned out, was optimistic, ending in an ambivalent event that might be read as an achievement of good music and the merited success of a talented, hard-working Black woman—or, at worst, might be critiqued as the naive celebration of a circus of late capitalism.

As I celebrated Beyoncé as a savvy businesswoman and media manipulator, and as I compiled bibliographies around the concept of the attention economy, I anticipated writing this dissertation from a particular stance of defensiveness. I expected to need to explain the relevance

and seriousness of my subject matter to a variety of skeptical audiences. “Yes!”—I envisioned myself shouting to my defense committee, to an editor, to conference attendees—“We DO need to take social media platforms and banal internet objects seriously in music studies, as sites of significant cultural production and the circulation of discourse!” In 2015, this seemed like an intervention that I could bring to the field of historical musicology, perhaps stirring some modicum of graduate-student-led controversy.

From a 2019 perspective, mounting such a defense seems almost laughably naive. Perhaps I should have foreseen that major corporate profits from sales of an incredibly successful album were only *one* end—and, it turns out, a relatively benign one—to which predictable viral machinations (and viral musicking) could be put. But the album release’s strategic activation of a reified virality was simply more transparent than the assemblages and negotiations that would unfold in the years that followed. The *BEYONCÉ* release was overt, spectacle and mechanism directed towards a clear singular aim. But the same circuits and pathways, the same techniques of listening and of not-listening, of curating and sharing, were highly politically expedient—particularly in a political formation so thoroughly entwined with the interests, structures, and personnel of American corporate and global capital. Viral techniques could be used to sell a variety of products, but also to precipitate the election of an American president, for the worldwide promotion of extreme political ideologies, for the circulation of xenophobia, fear-mongering, and bigotry—effectively, casually, virally.

As An Xiao Mina states in her recent *Memes to Movements*:

We have entered a new world of memetic contention, one where meme culture has become as much a tool for those in power as it has for those seeking to challenge it. Movements of hate have embraced this culture as much as movements of justice.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World’s Most Viral Media is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019); 131.

But has meme culture ever been anything but this ambivalent tool? A 2018 *Data & Society* report suggests the term “Digital Influence Machine” for the pervasive network of data collection infrastructure and targeting capacities developed by advertising, digital platform, and other intermediary interests that have been recently shown to be so effective in mass social and political manipulation.<sup>8</sup> The Digital Influence Machine is not novel, but simply the extension of Facebook’s business model, of Amazon’s, of Google’s. It is an extension of the looping circulations and cycles of capture and cooption traced across this dissertation, from the earliest and most chaotic amateur user days of Web 2.0: opportunistic tech behemoths in the business of capturing, hoarding, and monetizing data, in ways disconnected from, unforeseeing of—or disinterested in—ethical or democratic implications of that monetized data’s use. Propaganda and fake news optimized and algorithmically curated to generate the most potent possible affect—in the service of getting clicks, in the service of directing eyes, ears, and attention to advertisers. Propaganda and fake news optimized and algorithmically curated to generate the most potent possible affect—spurring violence, hate crimes, conspiracy theorizing, the collapse of legacy media structures, the election of charismatic demagogues. And all still in the service of directing eyes, ears, and attention to advertisers.

### **Sound Systems and Echo Chambers: Virulent Violence and Sonic Culpability**

On March 16, 2019, a white supremacist bearing a semiautomatic weapon attacked a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing at least fifty people and wounding dozens more.

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Nadler, Matthew Crain, and Joan Donovan, “Weaponizing the Digital Influence Machine: The Political Perils of Online Ad Tech,” *Data & Society Research Institute*, 17 October 2018. <https://datasociety.net/output/weaponizing-the-digital-influence-machine/>. Accessed 2 March 2019.

Using the affordances of the Facebook platform to broadcast live video, the shooter livestreamed his attack. In the hours that followed, moderation teams from Facebook, as well as those on platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit, scrambled to remove links to the video. Facebook reported that it took down over 1.5 million postings of the livestreamed mass murder in the first 24 hours after the attack—a figure suggesting more than 1000 attempted uploads per minute.<sup>9</sup>

Reporting on the New Zealand massacre for *The Atlantic*, sociologist Joan Donovan relied heavily on metaphors of sonic circulation and mediation—evidenced in the piece’s title “How Hate Groups’ Secret Sound System Works”—to assert and critique the complicity of the social media assemblage in the spread of the perpetrator’s ideology and personal infamy.<sup>10</sup> Despite the assumed visibility of internet memes and other content, and despite the shooter’s text-based manifesto, which was rife with reference to such memes (in particular, those linked to the far right), Donovan’s analysis characterized the violence, virulence, and menace of circulating terrorist content in sonic terms: platforms as “megaphones for white supremacists,” the perpetrator’s digital content as a “siren song” to other would-be terrorists, strategies of “amplification” linked to notions of “attention.”

This framing suggests the potency, the urgency available connotatively in the sonic. The sonic is the vector for contagion. It marks a more compelling, more deeply-engaged plane of experience. Employing such a framing, Donovan’s analysis resonates with a proliferation of

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<sup>9</sup> @fbnewsroom (Facebook Newsroom), *Twitter.com*, posted 16 March 2019. <https://twitter.com/fbnewsroom/status/1107117981358682112>. Accessed 21 March 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Joan Donovan, “How Hate Groups’ Secret Sound System Works,” *The Atlantic*, 17 March 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/03/extremists-understand-what-tech-platforms-have-built/585136/>. Accessed 21 March 2019.

other sonic metaphors used—at times in celebration but, with increasing frequency, as critique—to characterize the effects of particular digital and behavioral intersections across the 2010s. The concept of “echo chamber,” for example, rose to discursive prominence around the 2016 election. The term came to be adapted as a pithy descriptor for the seemingly homogenized digital environment afforded by the too-enthusiastic curatorial efforts of both humans and algorithms across social media platforms—understood to be effecting a ringing chorus of yeses, an artificial erasure of dissent. Such misleading and contrived digital constructions (the rhetoric went) were to blame for the divisiveness and fierce tribalism that seemed to characterize the social, political, discursive landscape of the United States, and the world more broadly.<sup>11</sup>

Anxious metaphors of megaphones and echo chambers thus clash with optimistic framings of democratic internet “voice” or the panacean possibilities of “listening” on- and offline. Indeed, his latter strain is familiar to music scholars and music lovers alike—listening, even the performance of harmony, figured as a literal and metaphorical solution for social division, or music theorized as a supernatural force for fostering communion. Indeed, as William Cheng has recently set forth at monograph length, as scholars like J. Martin Daughtry, Suzanne Cusick and others before him have suggested, it is precisely such rhetorics around music that have made it expedient for purposes of normalizing inequality, violence, surveillance, digital

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<sup>11</sup> See Nicholas DiFonzo, “The Echo Chamber Effect,” *The New York Times*, 21 April 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/04/21/barack-obama-and-the-psychology-of-the-birther-myth/the-echo-chamber-effect>. Accessed 21 March 2019. This represents a relatively early usage of the term in its 2010s media-political denotation. Studies by Quattrociocchi et al. in 2016, and subsequent reportage on those studies, shifted the term’s usage to focus more squarely around a social media technicity of filtering and making-visible. See Michela Del Vicario, Gianna Vivaldo, Alessandro Bessi, Fabiana Zollo, Antonio Scala, Guido Caldarelli, and Walter Quattrociocchi, “Echo Chambers: Emotional Contagion and Group Polarization on Facebook,” *Scientific Reports* 6 (2016). <https://www.nature.com/articles/srep37825>. Accessed 2 March 2019; Christine Emba, “Confirmed: Echo Chambers Exist on Social Media. So What Do We Do About Them?” *The Washington Post*, 14 July 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/07/14/confirmed-echo-chambers-exist-on-social-media-but-what-can-we-do-about-them/?utm\\_term=.ac8729d2a7e0](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/07/14/confirmed-echo-chambers-exist-on-social-media-but-what-can-we-do-about-them/?utm_term=.ac8729d2a7e0). Accessed 2 March 2019.

biopolitical capitalism and its attendant atrocities.<sup>12</sup> Further, these scholars' work demonstrates that musical and sonic violence is not simply metaphorical—it can be literal, bodily, visceral. In viral incidents like the New Zealand mosque attack, weaponized sound moves from the figurative realm of sound systems and platform-moderated silencing, to its literalization in autoplaying videos of the attack, the sounds of death comingled with the mass murderer's callouts to popular YouTube vloggers, appearing and proliferating across feeds and digital reportage.

This dissertation can in no way come to terms with such phenomena; it cannot fully account for or critique them, and it certainly does not suggest a solution for them. What I hope my dissertation *can* do is open up space for thinking about the ways in which sound and listening move between the metaphorical and the literal in internet artifacts and practices. I hope that it can provide a model for attending to internet artifacts and practices in their specificity, banality, and ephemerality—as well as a confirmation of the value and stakes of such attending for scholars of twenty-first-century musicking. Across the first decades of the twentieth century, social media platforms have been significant sites of musical practice, and music and sound have been deeply implicated in the rise and reification of virality, of the rapid and proliferating spread of digital audiovisual content across increasingly interconnected, pervasive, and powerful digital platforms. Indeed, across these decades and platforms, music has functioned as a pleasurable, normalizing force for a variety of corporate, economic, and political ends. Viral musicking is therefore an ambivalent—but not neutral—concept; as a mode of twenty-first-century musical

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<sup>12</sup> William Cheng, *Just Vibrations: The Purpose of Sounding Good* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Cheng, *Loving Music Till It Hurts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press); J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma, and Survival in Wartime Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Suzanne G. Cusick, "'You Are in a Place That is Out of this World . . .': Music in the Detention Camps of the 'Global War on Terror,'" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2/1 (2008): 1–26.

practice, it just as catchily catalyzes pleasure and communion as propagates bigotry and violence. The music goes 'round and round, and while I have suggested some modes of attending, of listening to and hearing musical virality, this dissertation has no inoculation to offer.

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